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SKIN *for* SKIN

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EBONY AND IVORY
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etc.

SKIN *for* SKIN

by

Llewelyn Powys



London

Jonathan Cape, 30 Bedford Square

1926

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN



Dedicated

In admiration and devotion

to

Gertrude Mary Powys

AGAIN there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the Lord.

And the Lord said unto Satan, 'From whence comest thou?' And Satan answered the Lord, and said, 'From going to and from the Earth, and walking up and down in it.'

And the Lord said unto Satan, 'Hast thou considered my servant Job, that *there is* none like him in the Earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause.'

And Satan answered the Lord and said, 'Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.'

'But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh and he will curse thee to thy face.'

And the Lord said unto Satan, 'Behold he *is* in thine hand; but save his life.'

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A CHURCHYARD COUGH

I FIRST discovered that I had consumption during the small hours of a November night in the year 1909. All through that autumn I had been troubled by a bad cold, by a cold of that particularly virulent kind, persisting week after week, which is common enough in an English countryside where for months on end people inhale mists, move about in chilled rooms, and sleep between damp sheets. I had been lying awake for hours, and never for a single moment had the rain ceased from lashing against the window-panes of my bedroom, never for a moment had the wind ceased from beating against the walls of the house, that wind which I knew, but a few minutes before, had been passing over Lenty Common, over Silver Lake, and over the lonely stretches of the Bradford Abbas road.

Suddenly, after a fit of coughing more violent than usual, an ugly conviction came over me that something was wrong. I lit a candle and discovered that my mouth was full of blood. The next day my worst misgivings were confirmed by a doctor. I was found to be suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis.

I was sent to bed; the two windows of my room being removed from their frames so that

I should be able to have as much fresh air as possible until such a time as I could travel to Davos Platz, the famous Swiss health-resort.

I was twenty-five years old and little enough reconciled, God wot, to the possibility of dying. It seemed to me, during those first hours of my sickness, as though I had done nothing with my life, as though I had been guilty of allowing a priceless opportunity to pass by with the obtuseness of a veritable dizzard. Now, the scales having fallen from my eyes, I made the resolution that never again, never till I 'lay in hell like a sheep,' would I suffer myself to be submerged by the commonplace. If only I was permitted to live one more year, two more years, how eagerly would I not mark the passage of the sun each day across the sky, the recurring phases of the treacherous moon, and the naked beauty of each starlit night !

For a month I lay in that small upper room, looking out through two gaping apertures at the bare branches of the elm trees in the school playing-fields. How well I knew the shape of each one of them ! As a small boy I had sat under their shade on many a hot summer afternoon, watching cricket matches and munching chocolate. I could remember wedging silver paper into the crevices of their bark, bark which covered a timber used in Dorset, time out of mind, for the making of coffins.

And beyond the elms were 'The Slopes,' leafless now, and appearing during those days sombre enough under the dense, sunless sky which hung like an enfolding pall over the Honeycombe Woods. *A Church-yard Cough*

The shock of discovering myself to be really ill had the strangest effect on me. I became like one drunken with wine. A torrent of words issued from my mouth. I acted as if death were not the end of every child born into the world, but an event which in some mysterious way had been reserved for me alone. I felt nothing but pride in finding myself laid by the heels so neatly. I liked to get what sensation I could out of it; and yet, at the same time, deep in my heart, I refused to realise how grave my sickness was. I liked to talk about dying, but I had no mind to die. I liked to rail against God, but I had no mind that He should hear me. In every possible way I dramatised my situation. My head became completely turned, and I chattered at Death like a little grey squirrel who is up a fir tree out of harm's way.

My father came to see me and prayed at my bedside, his head white as the silver belly of a minnow, white as a dove's wing against a thundercloud. I watched him on his knees with the superficial arrogance of a bull calf who frisks away after looking over a meadow hedge at a yoked bullock, a bullock who, by an enforced

Skin for Skin abnegation of its own personal freedom, no longer makes claims upon life. I looked, I say, at the snow-white head of my father, at that head which possessed the dignity of a lion's head together with a lion's low forehead, and continued to indulge my mind in its own conceits, now and again glancing self-consciously at my pale hands lying motionless on the counterpane. Presently, when my father had finished his supplication and was no longer kneeling on the bare rain-washed boards which, from his Victorian point of view, were so unspeakably depressing, I persuaded him to read me certain poems of Matthew Arnold. 'He was not so good a man as his father,' he said emphatically, as he, at length, put down the thrice-precious volume, bound like a school prize, and given to me by my brother John. In the afternoon he went off by himself into the town and brought me from Dingley's, the popular haberdasher, a black serviceable rug, which has kept me warm in three continents and still holds its woof together.

My brother John came also to my bedside. He had received news of my sickness in Paris and had hurried to Sherborne. He would enter my room very early, before it was light, and we would discourse at large, I in a whisper, so as not to injure my lungs. And the early morning sounds of the ancient town would come in to us through the open windows—the almshouse bell,

the convent bell, the crowing of cocks from distant back yards. *A Church-yard Cough*

As he left, one morning, for his breakfast at Acreman House, he met a beggar outside my door, and after his manner gave the rogue ten shillings. I observed the incident from my window and was full of indignation ; reproaching him on his return to my room with many evil words. Was not I in the sorest need just then of everybody's money ? What right had he to give so much to a lousy tramp with a great pack on his shoulders and a pair of stout legs under him ?

My mother came to see me, that strange woman who ever loved sorrow rather than joy. She brought me flowers from the garden at home, little button chrysanthemums and a spray of arbutus berries from the tree in the laurel bushes leading down to the terrace walk. But my heart remained hard towards her. I knew that she resented my going to Switzerland and would have had me instead return quietly to Montacute to die peacefully there clinging to the Christian hope. And yet, how beautiful she could look sometimes, her face for a moment illuminated, that face which in its delicacy and refinement spoke of the inward life that her romantic spirit had been compelled to lead, as the wife of a man with the pride of a lion and the low forehead of a lion, and as the mother of eleven wilful and godless children.

Very different was my meeting with my brother Theodore, who came over from his hermitage at the other side of the County. His chief pre-occupation seemed to be lest he himself should catch my complaint. He sat by the open window, inhaling the fresh air, and now and again drawing in his cheeks, as he uttered a thousand whimsical and fantastical observations. It was amusing to note the exaggerated deference he paid to the self-esteem of any schoolmaster who might come in, so that one who did not know would have thought that he prized nothing in the world more highly than the guinea-pig virtues of an English public-school man.

There also came to see me an old stone-mason from Montacute. He sat by my bedside, his whole demeanour displaying that particular exultation which one human being feels at seeing another caught in an evil trap. '*You have a church-yard cough,*' he said. Now, his use of these words at once arrested my attention. Long after he had gone I could not get them out of my mind. They were like a draught from an ossuary. In a moment I had been vividly reminded of all the superstitious, uncouth usages which have gathered around death in an English village, usages which doubtless had their origin in the ever-recurring startled surprise of generations of simple human beings at seeing the grim transformation take place, usages begotten in long vigils at the sides of the

dead, in white-washed chambers under thatched *A Church-*
eaves, and manifesting themselves in such odd *yard Cough*
— customs as putting white stockings on to cold feet,
feet never again to tread down June grass, or
break cat-ice on a December road. ‘*You have a*
churchyard cough.’ These words, I say, fairly made
me jump, bringing home to me, as they did,
almost with the rigour of an epileptic fit, that it
was I, and I alone, who, when all my dramatisa-
tions and sensationalisms were over, would be
spending cold nights, cold years, cold centuries,
alone in a cold elm-wood coffin.

A WHITE PALACE

THE sanatorium to which I was taken was one of those lofty and spacious hospitals which have sprung up during the last half-century, beyond all expectation, on the higher slopes of the Alps. And peculiar enough it looked, this ornate white palace, its southern side fretted with balconies as though with so many house-martins' nests. In truth, there must have been nearly a hundred such projections, each holding its own horizontal figure, swathed round and round in blankets, like a mummified bird imported from Egypt.

Night after night, when the moon, frail and luminous as the circular leaf of a silver poplar, rose high above the Frauenkīrch valley, I would lean over my balustrade and look out across the sanatorium lawns, to where a group of larch trees stood casting ink-etched shadows on the snow, their slim stems and feathery twigs clearly visible in the universal nocturnal irradiation which at such hours envelops the Alps.

It was, indeed, a queer anomaly, this crew of sick people marooned on a mountain-pass which for centuries had remained remote and unvisited by any except the hardiest peasants, men such as I would see on the Poste road in the daytime,

bearded and smelling of cattle-dung. And at night, how these same bearded devils, with lungs of leather, would fall to yodelling as they skimmed over the crisp snow, their bellies full of red wine, and with a ski on each heel ! I would hear them and would sit up in my chair to peer out at the corner where the road turned to go down to Davos ; and the sound of their goblin cries would echo along the hollow, hygienic corridors, echo up through the mountain forests, until it died away in the lonely reaches above the trees and in the windless spaces of the sparkling night sky. And yet, artificial and evil as our lot undoubtedly was, it could not have been called completely desperate. Most of us were still young. Was it this fact, or, as sometimes has been asserted, the very sickness from which we were suffering, that rendered us so daintily susceptible to the delights of love-making ? I for one had been long a victim to those pernicious suppressions which, in many cases, give so lamentable a twist to the natures of young men who have suffered the very real disadvantage of having been born in the English middle classes, suppressions rendering them ungenerous and petty in their attitude to life, and as Montaigne observed 'tiresome and inconvenient in conversation.' I was therefore overjoyed to find myself in so fortunate a playground, and felt, in truth, the infinite content we might imagine experienced by

a butterfly, a red admiral, let us say, which, after *A White*
a weary flight across the asphalt streets of a city, *Palace*
suddenly finds itself in the happy seclusion of a
garden full of geraniums and larkspur and
salpiglossis and hot lavender. I differed, how-
ever, from many of my companions in that I
passionately desired to live; and though I
relished to the full the exceptionally civilised
conditions within the sanatorium, yet, at the
same time, I was reluctant to sacrifice any chance
I might have of leaving it, cured of my disease,
even for the most exceptional favours.

From November to March, I grew steadily
better. By All Fools' Day my cough had stopped,
and I appeared to be practically cured. If I had
possessed enough wit, I would then and there have
gathered up my belongings and departed for
England. It was Doctor Huggard, the sagacious
baldheaded Consul from Davos, who dissuaded
me. 'You had better make sure of your cure,' he
said. So that I, behaving for all the world like
some yellow-striped wasp in this same garden
we have spoken of, who, having crawled over
his companions' backs to the very neck of the
treacle-pot, incontinently turns again to dip his
greedy nob into the precious sweetness at the
bottom, arranged to stay on through the summer.

The thaw of the spring months had set in, and
wide acres of ground had become green, re-
vealing the fact that the dissolving layers of

congealed snow on the hillsides had hidden fragile, exquisitely coloured petals pressing up from the chilled soil, and ready, when once they felt warmth and light, to convert the slopes of each mountainside into a Fra Angelico paradise. And the roe-deer, tired of scraping for fodder under the snow, tired of nibbling at grey-bearded lichen, came down from their winter retreats to graze on these open patches of fresh grass. And, lastly, the peasants emerged from the unventilated interiors of their log-houses, to dot the enormous landscape with their tiny figures.

With the indefatigable, silent energy of ants they would scrape at the surface of their hillsides – men, women, and little children – and, when all was prepared, plant in symmetrical rows their store of last year's roots, preserved with so much care through the long, cold months.

I would watch them at their work, sitting warm and happy under a granite rock, the smell of the freshly broken earth in my nostrils, that singular smell of the body of our planet which is the same in Africa, in America, in Europe.

By the end of the month of May, I suddenly became aware that my sickness had taken a turn for the worse. I recognised what had happened before any of the doctors. That particular taste in my mouth, surely it could mean nothing else ! At first I was not alarmed. It seemed to me that I had only to be more strict with myself, only to

concentrate my attention upon 'curing,' and all *A White*
would once more be well. By the end of June, *Palace*
however, I realised that I was far worse than I had
ever been before. All the symptoms of the
hideous complaint were once more showing
themselves. Each afternoon, as the hours passed,
I could feel my fever mounting higher and higher.
I became languid and listless and very nervous.
If at any time I fell asleep on my resting-chair for
a few moments, the wildest fantasies would
course through my dreams, and I would wake to
find myself bathed in a kind of death-dew, the
fingers of my hands clammy as toadstools, the
hair of my head drenched like seaweed. I could
not conceive any possible escape from the pre-
dicament I was now in. A snare had been laid
for me and I had run my head into the noose. A
gin had been set for me and I had deliberately set
my foot upon the pan. I could see before me
nothing but perdition, nothing but to rot in the
ground before ever I had properly understood
what it was to be alive. My physical strength
ebbed and ebbed, but not so the vital life-passion
in me. I recoiled as violently from the thought of
death as a pet rabbit from a lurcher dog. I looked
wildly about for some respite, for some means
by which I could postpone my doom. It seemed
incredible to me that any one ever could become
reconciled to dying. I would wake in the small
hours of the morning, swaddled in fear. With

scared eyes I would peer into the darkness of my room, and into the unknown days before me, and come to realise, during those tense, suspended moments, how completely unattended, how intolerably alone we are, each one of us, like cattle herded into a merciless stockyard, to be driven into the shambles, separately, when our turn comes.

Even now that my mind is no longer as tender as it was then, even now that I have become more philosophical and more accustomed to out-face the worst, I often find myself suspecting that it is only very rarely that even the most clear-sighted of us grasp the actual terms of our existence, each tremulous, intellectual soul being set shockingly apart, to endure as best it may its own destruction.

For hours and hours I lay supine, looking at the glass door opening on to my balcony, that door which at night took to itself something of the pallor of a linen shroud hung up on a clothes-line, looking at it with the same hopeless expression that I was to see long afterwards in the eyes of a cat, whose spine had been broken and who was awaiting a final blow from my hand as it lay on the verandah of an African farm. Very slowly the days passed. I would spend whole afternoons watching the sunlight on the mountain above the Frauenkirch village. Outlined sharply against the sky, its uneven topmost ridge limned the

prostrate figure of a woman. There she lay, *A White Palace* through winter, through summer, in her winding-sheet of snow, her head, her paps, her knees. her feet clearly visible. This mass of primeval, recumbent granite was called by the Swiss peasants, 'Die tote Königin,' the dead Queen, but at the English table it was always referred to, with the unerring faculty of the British for coining phrases that bear upon them, like their own heavy round pennies, the stamp of their island taste, as 'Queen Victoria in Bed.'

And then, one July midnight, a blood-vessel broke. I waked suddenly to feel that insufferable bubbling sensation in my chest, so familiar to consumptives. There was a rush of blood. I coughed and gasped for breath. Presently, with the pretty egotism of youth, I dipped my fountain-pen into the basin at my bedside and scratched a red cross on my diary, a cross such as a tramp might have made who could not sign his name, and yet who wished to record some important event in his wayfaring.

All night I lay on my back, scarcely daring to move. The sanatorium doctors stood by my bedside. They injected me with gelatine. They exhorted me to remain motionless. Eventually, however, they were called away to attend upon a young English boy named Burton, who had also been taken ill on this same Sunday night. His room was opposite mine, and as I lay I could

Skin for Skin hear him giving those short, choking coughs that are so unmistakable. At intervals I would answer him in the same manner from my side of the long, narrow, white-enamelled corridor, which smelt of disinfectants, and whose audible silence at night would be disturbed by no other noise than the occasional opening and shutting of a well-hung door. As the hours passed, the saltish, sticky taste of the blood became horrible to me. I shook as a young colt might which has been down on a frozen road and is apprehensive of another fall.

The dawn came at last. Gradually the forlorn whiteness of the blank panes grew more and more apparent, until I was able to watch the movements of a moth fluttering and fluttering down the inexplicable, transparent barrier which lay between its weary wings and freedom, a transparent barrier spotted over with infinitesimal heaps of white excrement left there by countless house-flies already imprisoned hopelessly in Room 57, on *Etage* 3.

OUT OF THE PIT

VERY slowly, as the weeks went by, my fever abated. It was a long time, however, before I was able to get out of bed. When I tried to stand, with the red-haired man-servant, Carl, supporting me, I found that my legs bent under my weight like limp straws. Doctor Huggard sounded me. 'I think you have got through this fairly well, but many things may happen before you recover,' observed the cautious old man, whose head was as bare as the egg of an ostrich, and who himself was to be underground before the year was out. For months I lay on my back, doing little but watch from morning till evening the play of light upon the high precipices of the dead Queen.

By the beginning of December, I was strong enough to come downstairs. But even so I was terrified of a second hæmorrhage. After the slightest exertion I would feel my chest aching and my temperature rising. I was now determined to get well. I would content myself with stepping silently through the lofty vestibule; for beauty, being satisfied with looking at the cyclamen and azaleas which stood in pots by the window. When I did say a few words, it was to my friend Wilbraham, or to the philosophic

Hungarian, rather than to Betty, Aida, or Zenäide. At this time I was as timid as a brown hare. I developed the habit of pressing the fingers of my left hand against that part of my chest which I knew to be badly affected, as though by so simple a means to avert any fresh catastrophe. This absurd form of neurosis cost me two waistcoats; the constant pressure of my fingers gradually wearing a hole through them.

A sudden change in the weather would be sufficient to send me up to my chamber. Sick with fear, I would creep back to bed without any orders from the doctor, and lie there listening to the wind that had suddenly got up and that was making the red striped awning of my balcony rattle, overturning, with a bang and the sound of dripping water, the vase of flowers I had forgotten to bring in from the little table by my chair.

The presence of Wilbraham in the sanatorium came to be a great source of consolation to me; and this in spite of the fact that he would do all in his power to bring my wild extravagances into the correct moderation of the scholar and the gentleman. I remember once talking in my enthusiastic manner about the West of England. I described Sedgemoor to him and how it looks on an autumn afternoon, with its pollard willows appearing like troops of old women coming back from Middlezoy market with baskets on their

heads. I described Ilchester to him and told him how pleasantly the Fosse Way leads you down from Tintinhull on a fine spring evening, with pickerel flowers coming out in the ditches, and with the lilac blossoms in the cottage garden at the top of Hunger Hill casting spiral shadows upon the first white dust of the old Roman road. I also spoke of the river Parret and how it winds through a hundred freehold orchards, which in the month of May scatter rose-tinted petals on its cider-coloured, slowly moving waters full of doltish, red-finned roach. To all this Wilbraham answered, raising his aristocratic head, which had already become so dear to me, 'Somerset is an historical county, a recognised historical county.'

I recall, too, how astonished he was, and how amused, when I came to him one evening in high excitement at having been shown by a German boy a certain treasured heirloom brought with him to the sanatorium and kept always at his bedside, nothing less, in fact, than a wooden salad-spoon that had once belonged to Wolfgang Goethe. The sight of this simple piece of wood had thrilled my imagination. It was the first object of the physical world which had connected me with the great man, and actually to handle the very instrument used by Goethe for stirring his cresses was to me a most rare and noble experience.

*Out of the
Pit*

I used to have the strangest dreams at this time of convalescence. Especially would I dream about death. I had done this since my childhood, but during this period these insubstantial images would be more palpable, more real, than ever before. I would be wandering over some obscure dream-landscape, when I would become suddenly aware of a certain smell assailing my nostrils. It would be sweet and at the same time foul. 'Ha !' I would say to myself, 'the smell of mortality, the smell of decaying human flesh !' And immediately the ground upon which I was standing would sink under me and I would find myself struggling in a graveyard which was giving way in all directions, struggling like a horse in a Wyoming 'soap-hole,' with the mould everywhere crumbling and rotting boards breaking through into I knew not what horrors ! And I discovered, in after-years, on occasions when I have approached with too much confidence the corpses of those I have loved, that the smell of my dreams *was* the smell of dead human bodies, a smell subtly different from that which rises from dead cattle.

The nurse one day told me that a little lady on the second floor, who had been sick for many years, had asked if I would come and visit her. I went to her room. Never in my life had I seen anybody so fragile. It was like talking to gossamer, talking to a dandelion-seed. One felt that the very steam from her coffee-pot at her bedside

might well be sufficient to waft her away, out of the window and over the cold mountains. To be able to retain one's poise to the end, to be able to die beautifully, that in itself is an achievement. "The nurse, after staying with me ten minutes, always says, 'I must go now to Mr. Powys.' " I wish I could convey how pretty, how provocative the little lady looked as she spoke these words. I went back to my room thinking that the only unpardonable sins are those committed in an unimaginative mood. It is more cursed to be dull and obtuse and unperceptive of other people's feelings than to indulge to the uttermost one's most frolicsome fancies. Insensitiveness is the one cardinal sin.

*Out of the
Pit*

It was a desolate afternoon. A gusty wind was blowing, carrying with it at intervals particles of snow dislodged from the projecting wooden cornices of balconies above mine. Two charwomen were busy cleaning the empty room next door. The sound of their damp mops flopping on the linoleum, the sound of their dispirited servant voices, as they reached my ears from out that garnished mausoleum, filled my soul with a devastating melancholy. It was not till the evening that I took heart again, and this because of a letter from my brother Willie, who had been shooting snipe in the water-meadows of his farm in Somerset. He enclosed a beak of a snipe in his letter. 'Hulloa,' says he, 'here's a girt beak very

Skin for Skin near long enough to reach from me to you.'

One day, before lunch, I dared to talk with Daphne, who looked as mischievous and enticing as ever. Against all prudence I persuaded her to come up with me to my rooms. She scanned the volumes in my poor library. 'Have you any naughty books?' she asked.

That evening the sun went down in splendour. At first, a line of clouds above the mountain became transformed into gold, then transformed into orange, then into red, then into crimson, into scarlet! 'See where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!' And between the colour-splashed clouds there lay the clear, green light of Eternity. I was sure of it. I cried out to God. And then, across the Frauenkirch valley, across the river whose snow-banks are hollowed out by lukewarm sewage from Davos Platz, a belated blackbird flew, croaking to itself.

After dinner, Wilbraham brought in a poem dedicated to me. It began :

Lately in Platonic mood
I expressed the judgement crude
That a man of taste must find
Caresses of the eye and mind
Than the touch of those that are
Of the senses finer far :
But my fairy Zenäide
Faithful of another creed
Yester 'eve constrained me
To recant this heresy

.

I read to him extracts from Louis Wilkinson's *Out of the letter referring to 'the Great O.B.' having been sacked from Cambridge. 'What a disgraceful business! These academic mediocrities, these yellow-blooded sneaking P——s and R——s yelping at the heels of the old man in currish concert to drive him out – the only figure of distinction, the only individual.'* He had heard from the O.B. himself, who described the affair 'as the most scandalous tissue of intrigue and treachery that ever stained the annals of the University.' Louis also wrote that he had heard from John. 'Do you remember how Lulu always spoke of *the* Broadway, instead of simply Broadway, and what a queer fluffiness and lazy, blurred leisureliness that simple prefix evoked?'

Just before twelve o'clock, on the last night of the year, Wilbraham asked me three questions.

'Is Christianity true?'

'*No, Christianity is not true.*'

'Is there a God?'

'*No, there is no God.*'

'Is there life after death?'

'*No, there is no life after death.*'

Presently I rose, and shutting the door upon the close, crowded room where we had been sitting, stepped out into the night. I walked to the further end of the empty verandah, long as a gallery, and stood for a moment regarding the white slopes about me. Suddenly there came to

Skin for Skin my ears, echoing up the mountain valley, the happy, unaffrighted music of church bells. Already, I thought, it is the morning of the New Year.

'VIRGINIBUS PUERISQUE'

HOWEVER much one's own emotions may be involved by what one experiences, however much one's own intellect may become implicated in the spectacle of existence, one must on no account forget the simple philosophic axiom that 'NOTHING MATTERS.' Thus I thought as I lay on my *Liege* chair, watching the soft snowflakes dancing past my balcony, wavering, hesitating, fluttering down, each to its destined resting-place. I was eating a couple of blue trout. With punctilious care I extracted with the prongs of my fork their round white eye-balls. Very early in life I had made the discovery that in the rotund retinas of a fish's goggle eyes are retained its very quintessential juices. 'One's code of morality should be merely an affair of good manners and expedience.'

And yet how infinitely piteous, how infinitely grievous a thing life can sometimes seem. I am thinking now of the look in the eyes of a girl from Cornwall, left here yesterday by her aunt, and who this morning was ruefully watching a row of icicles dripping on to the wooden floor of the verandah near her chair. 'I am very bad and very lonely,' she told me. 'I should not mind so much if only I had my dogs with me.' I went up

Skin for Skin to my room. On the table at the end of the white *étage* they had set a fresh assortment of flowers. There were some hyacinths exquisitely fragrant in a transmuted ray of sunshine, which fell on them through a double glass window. As I stooped, I was transported in a single instant to the top lawn at Montacute, where, in the round bed near the acacia, opposite the drawing-room window, Rogers used to plant bulbs capable in the lovely spring sunshine of sprouting and burgeoning into just such splendid blossoms. As I turned away, I was called into the German boy's room. The wooden spoon was still at his bedside. We talked together. 'You then regard God as little better than a fool?' 'Yes; but He has time to learn; we have not.' I touched his hand. 'Oh, I am *kaput*,' he murmured, and with tears in his eyes turned his face to the wall. I had been told that he had already published a book, and I made some allusion to it. 'No,' he said, 'I have done nothing but try to cure this' – and he tapped his chest – 'and even that has been a failure.' We spoke of Christianity. 'What if the God whom the Jews caught trespassing and nailed to the cross had been a young girl instead of a young man? What if an only beloved daughter had been given as a perfect and sufficient sacrifice?' 'EIN MADCHEN AM KREUTZE,' repeated the boy, as though pleased by the fantastical conceit. 'There may be,' I said, 'more in this matter than

we think. Who knows but Jesus really *was* an '*Virginibus Puerisque*' inspired and magnanimous goblin, born of a goblin sire and of a goblin dam, in a hidden grotto, under a cactus tree, somewhere above the River Jordan?' The boy is learning to play the guitar in anticipation of his last days. 'You can play it in bed, which you cannot do with a piano,' he explained. I left him nursing the instrument and filling the room with a sweet melody, his slender fingers moving to and fro, and his body swaying in harmony with the music, like a horned poppy on the edge of a precipice. He might have been taken, I thought, as a symbolic figure celebrating the last hours of the departing senses. After lunch I visited Wilbraham's room, and from his window we witnessed the departure of Miss Appleyard. It was a sombre sight. Supported on one side by Mrs. St. John and on the other by a nurse, she trod down the white steps with the stiff ineptitude of a cadaver.

As I returned from my walk that afternoon I came across a bundle of hay left in the snow by the side of the road. It smelt the same as meadow-hay at home, and when I examined it closely I could see remnants of crushed, dried-up flowers, but how disconsolate it looked against this everlasting white background! I found letters waiting for me when I got back. One was from John. He said he has heard from Willie. 'Is there anything except the soil, the earth, the blessed dung

of cart-horses and pigs, that really conveys health into the veins of mortal men? I fancy that the old fellow has never known Fear, the Grey Rider, the lonely Kite flying over the sands, the shadowy finger pointing to the unknown dread, to the imminent and yet indescribable calamity – No, the divine oblivion of cider and ditch-digging, of making bulls leap cows, and bringing foals into the light of day drives all abnormal terror from that Praxitilean forehead of sweet curls. . . . O Lulu, I am so tired. I long to drink rest as a traveller in the desert might kneel down and put his face to a palm-shadowed well.' There was also a letter from Theodore. 'So, old friend, let your head rest at ease, let your old mind hug itself, seeing that you will again walk soon. Remember old Gammer Guffle, of this town, who was in bed fifty years, and then got him up and walked, and Corporal Cutflesh, who is drunk five days in a week with bullets in his body as many as peas in a pod? You will return to pick up shells and cull yellow seaweed, old rogue, honest companion. Farewell. Theodore.'

In the evening I looked nervously at myself in the glass. Was I growing thinner? This suspicion set me brooding upon the destined history of each of our bodies: how they grow heavier and heavier, until they touch the maximum weight ordained for them in their life, and then grow lighter and lighter, until finally what is left

of them in churchyard mould would scarcely offset a pound of raisins on a pair of kitchen scales. Coming in, one day, from my walk, I met the Hungarian. 'Are you living or dying?' he asked. 'Living,' I asseverated stoutly. 'Damn!' he snapped, doubtless suspecting that I spoke truth. 'All wise men,' he went on, 'are pessimists. The only thing for us to do is to work day and night, so as to forget our destiny.' I left him and went and sat with Daphne for a little. 'I could not endure that you should be wicked with any one but me.'

Gradually the weeks passed, until once more there were indications that the snow was beginning to melt. By the end of March I was again taking long walks. I even went as far as the old white mill, where the road turns down to the Frauenkirch. By climbing over a dissolving, discoloured snowdrift, into which I sank nearly up to my knees, I actually touched the rough surface of its wall, so that I might mark this stage in my recovery, placing my finger on a certain brown area, where the plaster had fallen away, and which had the shape, so it seemed to me, of a dromedary. I spent half an hour in front of the mill, seated on a pile of resin-scented pine logs. Presently a peasant leading a mouse-coloured cow stopped for a drink of red wine. His host came out and stood with him. As I watched them grouped thus before me, so close that I

could sometimes feel the moist breath of the animal, I seemed to undergo a kind of mystical revelation as to the reality of concrete life. I became vividly aware of the actual moment, of the cow with its docile, brown eye, of the genial, bearded peasants, of the cup of red, bitter-tasting wine, as if sublimated in some curious way against that eternity of white and blue. Over the snow at my feet a shivering black fly crept, struggling to free each minute hairy foot from the ghastly white waste on which it had settled. I wanted to come to its assistance; but just as I moved, thinking I might persuade it to walk upon my alpenstock, the cow also moved, and an indifferent, cloven hoof carried the persevering insect down into an inch-deep hole of hopeless perdition.

On the way back, near the large châlet, where the three hams hang in the window, I met Watson, who told me that the Cornish girl had just had a hæmorrhage. So, all that last night, as I was talking to her about Dartmoor, the sickness was working its evil under her silk blouse! I happened to go up the lift with the white-coated German doctor, and took the opportunity of asking how she was. 'Not very well just now.' 'She hasn't been ill again to-day, has she?' 'Yes, she has.' And with these three words in my ears I stepped out upon the landing of the Third Floor.

In the evening the 'decadent' sat with me on my

balcony. 'There must be a purpose, a meaning, somewhere in the universe,' he said. 'I would shoot myself if I thought it was not so.' – 'But why shoot yourself? Surely for an intrepid mind there is something exciting, exhilarating, about the idea of an aimless, irresponsible universe, a Gothic universe?'

When he left I settled myself to try to read that courtly Collect, '*Virginibus Puerisque*,' written at Davos Platz thirty years ago. In a little while there came a knock at my door and Daphne entered. She looked radiant. She, at any rate, will get quite well again. 'Why are your eyes so large and deep to-night, Daphne?' I asked. 'Because of love, because of love,' lightly she laughed.

A HOME-COMING

By the end of April I was strong enough to travel, and my brother John came out to Davos Platz to fetch me home. I recollect standing by his side in the main thoroughfare of the town while he looked about him in dismay at the rows of horizontal figures lying in drab balconies on each side of the street. 'Ech !' he exclaimed, 'that we might see Jesus walking through these streets, followed a little way behind by his disciples, bearded, venerable, and discussing some nice theological point.'

We reached Folkestone on May Day, and were soon at Montacute. My proud sister Gertrude, with tender care, had prepared the nursery for me, setting my bed by the window, which looked out upon the twisted boughs of the acacia, boughs whose particular twists and turns were as familiar to me as my own knuckle and knee joints. The nursery had always been one of the pleasantest rooms in the house, so much more sunny and cheerful than the small chamber at the end of the north wing, where, as boys, we used to sleep, and which was known as the 'end room,' and was always regarded as damp by my mother, who would be careful to see that our woollen vests were carried down to the kitchen fire each

Skin for Skin Saturday night, so that 'the chill of the end room' would be out of them when we dressed on Sunday morning.

From the nursery window I could see, through the trees, like a miniature engraving, a view of the Abbey. I also looked out upon a line of Wellingtonias in the field opposite, cone-shaped tapering trees, whose forms, so neatly symmetrical, had always struck us children as being the exact replicas of the trees which we were constantly arranging on the table together with tiny, unsteady, painted animals. A deodar grew at the top of the Montacute House drive, and I could watch the particular branch which, as a child, had so fascinated me, because, in outline against a patch of sky to the left of the Abbey, it would take to itself the shape of a rider on horseback. How often, on a late October afternoon, when our nurse, Emily Clare, was seated on the horsehair sofa sewing, and we were waiting for the lamp to be brought in by the maid, had I not gone across to this very window to look out at the swaying movements of the imaginary rider, while far above him, far above the pointed tree of which he was a part, far above the topmost buttress of the Abbey gateway a myriad rooks would sweep across the sky, like black leaves tossed this way and that by the wild autumnal wind! This in winter. In summer the prospect would be entirely altered. Muffled up

in folds upon folds of clematis, the window *A Home-Coming* would then look out upon a lawn thick-grown with heavy flowers, the acacia itself, even, each year, to one's utter amazement, producing out of its apparently dead wood a profusion of creamy white blossoms, smelling, if crushed in the hand, not unlike the everlasting sweet-peas which grew outside the tool-house window.

At first I did not dare to walk far. What a delight to be back again in these fields and lanes where one's spirit, no less than one's eyes, could be restored by the colour of green! And how sensitive I was after my long exile in the mountains, how sensitive to the richness of these lowland meadows, where under each field-hedge golden-billed cock blackbirds stepped about in the cool grass, as much at ease as in a garden.

One morning found me walking with John to Stoke churchyard. We had been here often in the old days. We liked to look at the ancient tympanum of Ham stone above the church door. Though coated with the green mildew of the centuries, it represented still quite clearly King Stephen shooting an arrow at his rival, the granddaughter of the Conqueror, chipped out by the old mason in the form of a retreating lioness. The enormous stone had been carved and put into place when King Stephen still sat upon the throne of England.

We found that there were workmen in the

churchyard occupied in raising the mediæval village cross which for as long as I could remember had been lying amongst the nettles under the churchyard wall, and which now, thanks to the energy of the parish priest, was to be set upright once more on this bright summer morning. A firm base had been prepared for it, and it seemed likely, when once it was placed in its new position, that it would be able to weather as many winters as the door-head which marked in so dramatic a way the zodiac-sign of the Norman King, dead so long ago. 'To appreciate the beauty and pathos of Christianity one must not believe too much,' John remarked. 'What an amazing episode in the history of humanity is the appearance of this cult! How wonderful, and yet how inexpressibly melancholy!' We watched the men hoisting the monolith. Their trousers — made yellow by the dust of Ham stone — were brushing against some crimson roses which grew near the path. 'It is equally strange to think,' I said, 'that when that cross falls again from its upright position, Christianity will be dead as earth.'

We walked up the little lane behind. Several plants of Herb Robert were growing in the crumbling interstices of the churchyard wall. I picked some and went on my way, over the dry spring mould of the lane, alternately crushing them and smelling them. The herbage of the banks

above the ditches on both sides of the lane rose up until they merged with the light-green leaves, each edged with a delicate silver down, of the beech trees growing in the two hedge-rows. 'There is no excuse for ennui and weariness,' said John. 'How mad in this world to take anything for granted! The thing to do is to divert your mind from what is mean and sordid, so that large, luminous thoughts may roll in upon it like amber-coloured waves.'

A Home-Coming

At the top of the lane we met Fred Chant. 'Well, I'll be damned!' he exclaimed. 'I never looked to see ye back, Master Llewelyn, 'cept as a corpse, if ye do follow my meaning.' While we stood talking, I kept looking at a gorse bush, heavily scented, embossed with golden bloom, about which there buzzed a bee with two brown honey-bags on its thighs and a murmuring rapture in its heart. The old wood-cutter looked me up and down, from the hat on my head to the boots on my feet, stained yellow with buttercup-dust. 'Ye may linger out the summer,' he said judiciously; 'but you'll never get rid of that cough. These here doctors say they can cure ye, but they cannot do it. They can patch ye up, maybe, but, never fear, you'll soon be a-wearing a green coat.' By 'wearing a green coat,' he referred, I knew, to the green grass, which he was convinced would soon be growing over my grave. We walked on through the wood

Skin for Skin 'I am afraid I have the same kind of sneaking desire for some sort of metaphysical theory as a background to life that others have for a definite religion,' remarked John, as we approached the gate into Hedgecock. 'Is not a vivid apprehension of life's brevity sufficient?' I asked him.

That night a barn-door owl waked me with its hooting. It had settled on the acacia, on the bough nearest my window, on the bough with the iron clamp about it. 'Dead feet! Dead feet!' it called. I could see its broad humped form quite clearly against the night sky, and I could not but envy it its long still hours in the deserted garden, alone with the smokeless summer chimneys, with the gleaming slate roofs, with the haunted, whispering trees, and with the silent carriage-drive lying like a frozen river between black lawns.

The Phelps family were away that year, but they gave me leave to walk in their garden as much as I liked. And so, when I became tired of our own terrace walk, I would cross the orchard by the old ruined house, and presently be wandering in the stately pleasure-grounds of the famous Elizabethan mansion. I would find it hard to indicate how deeply I was influenced by the seclusion and patrician dignity of those fine walks, with their tall yew hedges, and with their wide spaces of sun-baked garden masonry, which seemed to exhale, during each noontide

recalescence of that cloudless summer, a heat of *A Home-Coming* their own, altogether different from the heat which rose from the mown lawns, the short-cropped turf of which would feel to my hand, when I knelt down to touch it, like a live pelt.

I would spend hours and hours at the end of the Cedar Piece, looking at the daisies, at the narcissi, at the yellow tulips, at a bullfinch with a beautiful cherry-coloured breast hopping about amongst the green fir-cones ; or gazing off into the park, through an atmosphere quivering, palpitating, instinct with life, to where the heavy shadows of the great elms fell upon the pasture-grass like pools of deep water ; and then suddenly from some unseen retreat in that favoured pleasaunce, so that I listened in a kind of ecstasy, a painted peacock would scream out to God its shrill, fantastic acquiescence.

Only once was my happiness in any way disturbed in those gardens. I had been sitting on the steps outside the old stone pigeon-house, listening to the drowsy cooing that came from its hollow interior, where in an atmosphere of feathers and doves' excrement, innumerable fantailed pigeons sat dozing away the long afternoon, when suddenly I caught sight of the figure of a neighbouring clergyman coming towards me. I had no time to slip away. I knew him to be a tiresome young man, full of zeal. I uttered a few civil words and then indicated as best I was able

that I considered it time for our chance encounter to end. He would not budge. I looked into his pin-point eyes, eager and pre-occupied, as those of some damned fanatical black cat on its way to save its kittens from a burning barn. Presently it dawned on me that he had some especial communication to make. I was filled with alarm. Proximity to such an individual in such a place was extremely distasteful. He was the kind of person who should never have been allowed to enter so beautiful a garden, who should have been turned away by Mr. Jack Hull at the lodge gates.

But what was he going to say? Apparently, some young village boy of his parish had spoken to him of me, had used me, in fact, as evidence to support his own freethinking views, asserting that there surely could be no good God directing the affairs of the world when a young man as innocent of sin as myself was struck down with a fatal illness. At first I listened to his tale with amusement. Then when I found that he was suggesting that I should walk over myself and reason with the young infidel, my attitude changed. 'I could not possibly do such a thing,' I hurriedly assured him. 'After all,' I added, by way of detaching myself completely from the man, 'I, too, am something of a latitudinarian.' 'What is your great difficulty? The incarnation?' I doffed my hat and ran. Coming up through

the lower orchard, I disturbed a rabbit, which *A Home-*
raced away and sprang into the hedge by the old *Coming*
lane. I watched a bramble, disturbed by its furry
belly in its last jump, tremble for a few seconds
before resuming its accustomed stillness under
that ocean of sweet blossoms.

THE KING'S AFFAIRS

IT was during the early part of this summer that Louis Wilkinson came to stay with me. In appearance he seemed exactly the same as in the old days at Cambridge. He was full of good talk. He told me that he had the distinction of being the first person to write to Oscar Wilde sympathetically after his conviction. We were strolling through the fields below Batemore when he made this remark, and presently we came to the wishing-well, where we sat for a while.¹ 'What do y'lack? What do y'lack?' croaked a bullfrog, with a voice bass as the lowing of an ox, asquat on the edge of the crystal pool under a hart's-tongue fern. 'Long life, give me long life,' I cried.

Theodore paid us a visit one day. We went a walk together, all four of us, but John could not go far, because he had a bad toe. He wore an enormous mocassin and came limping after us like an injured cacodæmon. We sat on a seat in Park Covert. Louis was stung by a nettle. Cursing with surprise and rage, he stamped it deep into the ground, together with many pink-campions. It was done before John had time to interfere. We walked on up the moss-grown, velvet path. 'Which of us three would you prefer

Skin for Skin to be God?' asked John. 'Louis,' I said, 'because he is so moral and just.' 'Good Heavens,' John answered; 'but think of his antipathy for nature. Why, he'd make the world of boulevards; and between them would lay blank, impenetrable, palpable voids; where now is nature there would be great belching spaces of roaring chaos.' Before lunch we sat in the terrace walk. 'I feel,' said Theodore, drawing in his cheeks, 'like Southey in Portugal.' I think he enjoyed himself, however, for three days later my mother received this letter from him: 'My dear Mother, I enjoyed seeing you very much. I was sorry Jack had a bad toe, but if he had had a well toe he might have fallen into a mire or evil place. Theodore.' A letter came to me from Louis by the same post. 'I shall bathe in the recollection of last week's golden hours. My egoism *is* adamant, but I swear, dearest Lulu, I love you, even though I drink champagne over your death-bed. Who knows but you will drink over mine? You shall not die, but live. Yours is the star of the morning. A hundred thousand embraces await you in the arms of unborn to-morrows, and amorous kisses without count.'

Early in the summer I visited Pit Pond. This deep, black pond, lying in the heart of Pit Wood, had a thousand memories for me. As children, we used to skate on it, waiting impatiently, whenever there was a spell of cold weather, 'for

Pit Pond to bear.' On many occasions have I seen my father sail round the miniature island in its centre with enormous, swift-gliding strides. Because he himself could not do figure-skating he had the greatest contempt for it, and left us all with the lifelong impression that to be able to swoop round and round a pond in rapid circles was incomparably a finer achievement than to cut any number of eights on the ice. 'I never cared much for fancy skating,' he would say, coming up to the bank where Littleton, always competent and always unselfish in such matters, was on his knees, adjusting my sister Marian's skates ; and away he would go again, round and round and round, sending great, far-reaching, resonant cracks up under the boat-house, where a pleasure-boat was still lying, its keel held fast in frozen mud—mud, which, when it thawed, smelt of the skeletons of eels, and yet contained in its black ooze rough oyster-shells, with mother-of-pearl interiors of unparalleled smoothness and beauty.

Those brief periods of frosty weather were always thrilling. Even at midday, when one was returning to a lunch of cold beef and walnut pickles (pickles made of the very same walnuts, black and wrinkled, that I had seen laid out on a tray in the sun, in front of the kitchen window, with frugal foresight, while it was still summer), particles of hoar frost would yet remain intact wherever there was shadow, and even where there

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was no shadow, though the surface of the ground would be soft, one would be able still to feel 'the bone' in it. And after what a strange manner one's childish fancy used to be provoked by looking down through the black ice of Pit Pond to see a fish deep-embedded in the transparent substance, a fish perfectly preserved, like an ornament in glass, caught obviously unawares as it loitered too long near the surface on that first evening when our weather-vane above the 'end room' had swung suddenly round to the north-east.

As I approached the pond on this particular morning, I found it difficult to believe that winter winds could ever strip bare the foliage-encysted branches of the great oak trees which stood about the deserted keeper's cottage, each separate, irregular, pendent leaf being of so rich and of so deep a green. I was alone. Everybody had gone to church. I advanced along the path by the laurels. A rabbit with broken back rolled out of my way. It tumbled into a bed of nettles, but I had plenty of time to see the agonised look that its brown eyes gave me. A cuckoo kept bawling from the direction of Park Mill. A brown mallard piloted her brood across the shadowed level of the pond. Dragonflies were hovering everywhere, sometimes darting over the water, sometimes returning to poise themselves like slender shafts of blue and red enamel on the purple-tinted water-mint. When I reached the deep end of the pond

I paused and looked into the water. Countless round beetles were paddling about below its surface, now and again turning turtle and exposing their white bellies. A swan near 'the island' uttered sharp, unexpected, springtime cries.

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From the unseen incorrigible cuckoo, from the lascivious swan, from the adroitly steering duck, from the superficial dragonflies, and from these jolly, sportive beetles, turning themselves, arse over tip, so gravely under water, I learnt the truth of the Pantagruelian aphorism, 'Do what thou wilt.' 'Fay que ceouldray.' 'But what of the rabbit? Could you not so much as step out of your way to crack its skull with your ash plant?' murmured a spirit.

That evening my mother came and read to me in the terrace walk. She read Walt Whitman.

What blab is this about vice and virtue?

Evil propels me and the reform of evil propels me;
I stand indifferent.

My mother was one who ever preferred the shady side of the road, and would rather carry in her hand a white foxglove than a coloured foxglove. When she was tired of reading we walked together in the orchard. The last rays of the sun slanting through the beech trees slapped the flank of a great sow and transfigured it. 'So the spirit of God will light up the most degraded soul,' said my mother. The orchard looked

strange and unreal in the tempered light, as though it were under water. She said she felt ill. 'I want like an animal to hide myself, to crawl into a hole, into a bush.' We came back, to hear the voice of my father as he walked through the potato garden in the cool of the evening. And it sounded in my ears as natural as any of the familiar sounds that used to make up our daily life, as natural as the slam of the back gate, as the ringing of the outside bell, calling us into the schoolroom from our play. At family prayers in the evening he prayed that we should not be won over by 'seducing words,' but should instead live in 'purity and holiness as before God.' How could I feel anything but a deep affection for him as he knelt there on Uncle Littleton's tiger-skin, with his elbows to the left of the silver inkstand and to the right of my mother's Moxon edition of Tennyson's poems? As for his intellectual notions, that's another matter. Those family prayers were in truth something to remember. Punctually at ten o'clock each evening, my father would turn to my mother and say, 'I think we might ring now for the maidens.' I can well recall how that last word caused Louis Wilkinson to prick up his ears, when he heard it uttered the first time, and how crestfallen he looked when there entered, one behind the other, the four faithful servants who had been in the house as long as I could remember.

Very noble my father appeared on Coronation Day, as he marched at the head of the procession through the village, several inches taller than anybody else, in full canonical dress. And what a gentleman the old man looked, as he stood in the Park, his bared white head clear-cut against the foliage of an elm! I tried to imprint the scene upon my memory. The day had begun badly, with mist. 'What is King George doing now?' questioned John at breakfast. 'Fussing in and out, and tapping *his* barometer?'

In the afternoon we went for a walk through Park Covert. How exquisite the foxgloves with their silken, spotted throats! I got into trouble for carelessly crushing one of them as we rested at the top of the path. 'Life of any kind, however undeveloped, should be regarded,' John said. 'We ought, each one of us, to be aware of the separate individual life of every bit of weed, of every variety of existence around us.' At night I looked out of the 'end room' window and saw several hundred bonfires in celebration of the King's affairs. I could see a light on Dunkery Beacon, on Camelot, on Pilsdon, on the Quantocks, and on Wynyard's Gap.

The next day I walked by myself to Park Mill, some three miles out of Montacute, over the fields. I had often walked to the cottages there with my father. In the nearest of them used to live three silent women, like the Three Fates.

One of these women was rumoured to have once had a sailor lover. The atmosphere of the room in which these three silent sisters sat, eking out a bare existence by making gloves, was intense with deep, smouldering passions. Even as a child I used to wonder what thoughts were revolving in those large, melancholy, animal heads, which day after day, year after year, looked out of the same small window. They would place a chair for my father, and there he would sit, apparently unperturbed by that listening silence, and after a while, when an appropriate interval would seem to have elapsed, he would fumble in his purse for half a crown, and take his departure. And on our way back, my father's spirits would rise. Perhaps he was thinking of the steaming tea waiting for him, and the warmth and friendliness of his dining-room, with his wife at one end of the long table and his eleven children about him; for as soon as we came out on to Batemore and saw the village lights below us, he would have an ecstasy, and stride forward, rubbing his hands together, as any one of his six sons will do to this day, when they become aware from time to time of the simple satisfaction of being above ground.

The Three Fates had gone now. Doubtless they had been dug into yellow clay by the Montacute sacristan. Sammy Guard and his ramshackle family were installed in their cottage. I stopped to talk with them for a few moments.

The eldest girl, Lotty, came out and stood playing with a brindled gib-cat. The mother told me that the girl sleeps in the room overlooking Pit Wood. The glass was out of her window. It must be wild and rough sleeping there in the winter, with owls in the cold trees answering the husky bark of vixen-foxes. And during these summer months how the bats must flutter in and out over the girl's sleeping head ! Old Sam Guard himself came in before I had left. He had been cutting a hedge near the withy-bed. 'I've got a tidy toy up there,' I heard him say. 'Goo-o-o. Why, they thorns be as big round as elms. I be b—— some of 'em be twisters.'

*The King's
Affairs*

AUGUST

THAT summer was the hottest I have ever known in England. Day after day the sun rose over the horizon behind Vag farm into a cloudless sky. The pastures were no longer green. The cattle roamed over the brown grass-fields like famished eland on diminutive, scorched-up African veldts. There was so little water flowing in the deep river-bed of the Yeo that it was possible at almost any point in its long, winding course to paddle across it. The chub, fearful of being stranded in shallow water, kept themselves at the bottom of the few deep holes that remained. The stock spent long hours in standing about in places where the river was shaded by a group of alders, by an oak tree, or by the stonework of some old bridge. The grasshoppers skipped from bent to bent, the butterflies from flower-head to flower-head. The crust of the earth cracked and cracked, so that I was often able, right out in the middle of a field, to put my walking-stick into a crevice two or three feet deep. Many farmers were compelled to cut down saplings from the hedges, and branches from the trees, to save their cattle from starving. Not one of them but was short of 'keep.' As each Friday they came back from Yeovil market, they would do

nothing but lament about the state of the country, as seen in panoramic view through the open window of a third-class railway-carriage.

On the hottest of all the days of that summer, when, as we learnt afterwards, the thermometer stood at one hundred Fahrenheit, John and I set out for a walk to Tittinhull. We approached this favourite haunt of ours by way of Marsh Lane. At the entrance of Captain Chaffey's drive we stood talking to Denman. This old labourer had been a quarryman on Ham Hill for nearly eighty years. He had seen us from a distance, trailing along in white flannels through the Stoke Road dust. He accosted us. I began to think that the old man had already, early as it was, been drinking cider, for presently he laid his toil-encrusted hands upon us and cried out in a loud voice: 'Sixty years ago to-day come two months I was trapesing along this here turnpike road to ploughing match. Yes, we know as much of life as they that cross the ocean, we *that live on the deep soil*. We have *our* waves as well as the rest of them, we quarrymen, ploughmen, shepherdmen, come fine, come rain, come cold, come het.' The old chap was so filthy and made such a din as we stood there under the decorous copper beech, that I was glad to escape through the captain's white iron gates.

Presently we came by Wulham's Mill, that ancient mill which stands by its stream completely lost in meadows. We leaned over a gate. The

grey roof, sunken with age, cut an uneven line *August* against the sweltering sky. The place seemed held under a strange noonday glamour. There was never a rustle in the long potato-rows in the garden, not one small purple flower stirred. Except for a pregnant tabby-cat stretched out under a currant-bush at the edge of the stone-flagged path, there was no sign of life. It was here that the miller's little daughter had been drowned in the mill-pond, her body being seen by her father floating against the old, rusty, water-worn sluice. It was here, also, that I was to come two years later with Marion Linton.

At last we reached the churchyard, which we two had been in the habit of visiting for so many years. Not far from the old seventeenth-century altar-tomb of the family of Francis, we noticed a new grave, covered with Madonna lilies, such as were then in flower in all the cottage gardens. Whom had they buried here so recently, in this hot July weather? We moved across to the church porch, seeking shelter from the sun, and pushed open the heavy door, which held in its oaken timber great nails deep embedded, nails driven home centuries before by the hands of dead Denmans, long since crumbled to dust, nails still able to respond, after the limited fashion of iron, to the divine sudorific influences of that unequalled day.

We had some bread and cheese at the Lamb.

We gave a drink to a postman who came in. He said he preferred frosty weather. Not so an old tramp, who had once been a ship's steward. 'I likes this het,' he kept repeating, as large, silvery beads fell from his forehead. He had come from Yeovil, resting often, so he told us, in shady places. The ends of his boots had been slit to make them easier for walking. We bought a celluloid hair-comb from him for half a crown. The tavern parlour was cool as a well. A wasp was beating itself against a window-pane, and John must needs catch it in his handkerchief to let it out. How different was the smell of this interior from the smell of the church ! And how the atmosphere of such a place lends itself to philosophic discourse ! In a tavern one touches life at its centre. Here is the heart of the bee-hive. Here, at any rate, no spiritual treachery is tolerated ; here, at any rate, no deceitful idealism stretches out tendrils white and sickly . . . He who sits down on a tavern settle must even take the world as he finds it. He must know what birth means, and that we come into the world in no very cleanly manner ; he must know what love means, and wrath, and lust, and, above all, death. In a tavern, come winter, come summer, the blunt truth will out. I had walked not long before to a village situated behind West Coker, and had observed the grave of a former clergyman of the place, with the words, 'A little while,' carved on the head-

stone. 'A little while !' 'A little while !' It would *August* be known under the smoky rafters of the Lamb Inn that the Rev. Launders' body was to lie there in the churchyard for a great deal longer than 'a little while.' These pretty texts survive best in a confined and pretty atmosphere, but grow faint and frail in these snug hostels, where simple, honest men gather, men who are disposed to speak good words of the old bawdy earth, and who, like so many Grangousiers, delight to sit warming their ballocks before a fair fire. We paid our reckoning to Mrs. Mary Yard, our hostess, who looked very prim and dignified in her white cap, and stepped out into the giddy, merciless sunshine of the little front garden.

We now wandered into Tintinhull Great-Field. The grass was dry and slippery. We were making our way to Kiss-Me-Down covert. On each side of us lay sultry orchards, with the trunks of ancient apple-trees, half fallen to the ground, like a host of tottering old men, which the sun had ensorcerised there. Lesser blues and gate-keepers flitted about our boots, the soles of which had been polished so smooth by walking over the fields. We found that the drove going up through Kiss-Me-Down was littered with straw. We trod silently. ' 'Tis as though the king of the owls were sick,' said John. Above Windmill we passed through a field of oats, the green stalks of which had already taken to themselves that

Skin for Skin amethystine tint characteristic of oat-straw when the grain is approaching maturity.

We were back in time for tea. In those days we were always wondering whether it was more pleasant to wash our hands before eating or to leave them still odorous of the countryside. Often, while we were still debating this nice point, we would hear the tea-bell ring, and without more ado would go downstairs, one behind the other, to find the rest of the family standing in their places, waiting for my father to say grace, before he began cutting up the two loaves of bread, which stood on their wooden platters before him, a brown loaf and a white cottage-loaf, the soft, crinkled crust of the latter being especially delectable when it came fresh from the ovens of the black-bearded baker.

When we had sat down, the old man, my father, rubbing his hands with delight at having his children around him, would ask us about our walk, and we would tell him that we had found the body of a dead heron down by Wulham's mill, and also a flower which we thought might be skullcap. And at that he would send my sister Lucy to fetch his 'Bewick' and his 'Johns Botany' from his study. He would then read out extracts from the two volumes. And afterwards, with a look of boundless benevolence, he would rub his hands and say that he was glad that we boys had had an interesting walk. And at this

my mother's face would become lit up with a *August* smile; at once so radiant, so sweet, and so *ironic*, that I would forgive her for being in love with the side of the moon which turns itself away from the earth, and which has never once been seen by Tintinhull tipplers, as they stagger out of the public-house past the village stocks, past the great elm, and past the duck-pond. And she would lean over to John and stroke his hand ; for she always loved him, her first-born, the best.

Meanwhile, Lord Eversley, who, as our father used to tell us, had taken the side of our great-grandmother Shaw in some peevish quarrel with the first Lord Lilford, would look down out of his gold frame with the set, supercilious stare of a man of the world. And presently we would ring for more butter, which would be brought in creamy and freshly churned, and then we would ring for more milk also, and have the white china jug, with tomtits painted upon it, refilled with what was all 'top of the pail.'

SOME time towards the end of that enequalled August, Bernard Price O'Neill came to Montacute. Perhaps, if I exclude my brother John, this incomparable Irishman has contributed more to my culture than anybody. How sensitive in his perceptions, how delicate in all his relationships, how unsurpassed as a companion! With a wit as light as a tomtit's feather, with a humour as sturdy and convoluted as the ear of a hedgehog, his presence bestowed a value, a significance, to every incident of the day. In that divine weather, to have his genius at my side was an unparalleled privilege. Together we walked along a thousand highways, along a thousand goose-paths, his round, well-favoured face gleaming under the broad brim of his panama hat as though it possessed a kind of lustre of its own, like the light in the tail of a glowworm.

There was no public-house within reach that we did not visit – The Choughs at Yeovil, The Carpenter's Arms at Chilthorne Domer, The Dolphin and The Hole in the Wall at Ilchester, The Half Moon and The White Horse at Martock, and the Portman Arms at Middle Chinock – our tongues, meanwhile, wagging in our heads as merrily as a pair of bell-clappers ringing in the

new year. Often we would be content to sit by the side of a dusty road for hours together, chattering with glee like two chipmunks on a sunny wall. All was delectation, all was entrancement, our very excrement transformed. 'Ha! what divine mustard of the Gods!'

One morning, as we squatted on our haunches amongst some bracken, 'Cuckoo!' we called to a bullfrog who was regarding us from a mossy chink in a beech-tree bole. 'Cuckoo!' carolled the doctor. 'Perhaps,' said he, 'perhaps 'tis Diogenes!' And so wonderfully had the mood of my friend bewitched me, that I half came to believe that the soul of the old Greek was present with us in that spinney, through the wilting leaves of which the sempiternal sunshine sprinkled itself. We would be out of doors all day long. Before breakfast, even, we would wander down the village street, past Miss Sparks's shop, to sit, full of good talk, on the great stone coffin that had once contained an abbot's body, and which now lay under the south side of the church tower. Perhaps for the space of half an hour we would remain perched on the edge of that enormous sarcophagus, hollow as a nut, into the snug recess of which old George Wittle was to creep ten years later, drunk as a honey-fed bear, after Club-walking. The ringers found him in the evening, just as they were about to go up to the belfry. 'Well, I be damned!' one of them cried. 'If that bain't be wold George a-lying

in wold coffin as snug as coney in burrow.' The *September* befuddled labourer was immediately dragged out of his resting-place, still drowsy, but in a dim kind of way proud of his exploit. 'Well, George, thee knew well enough 'sknow not to be runned over by they motor-cars; the last trump be better, eh, George, though God A'mighty He'd soon have gived 'ee gee up and no mistake if He'd a caught 'ee.'

Then we would leave the old stone coffin and wander over to my sister Nelly's grave, dead, poor lass, already eighteen years, and stand, for a moment, on the very spot of ground under which to-day lie the body of a man and the body of a woman, sleeping an unawakening sleep, untroubled by thoughts of turbulent children.

My brother A.R.P., the architect, was at this time restoring Langport Church tower, and we went to visit him. He had a French governess to look after his daughter Isobel. And that night, as a red-glowing harvest-moon appeared over the horizon, projecting above the stubble like God's thumb, a troop of us frolicked and danced and sang in its sweet light. What laughter, what jollity! Over our heads the shrill bats flew, away in the lower meadows the corn-crakes were calling, while near by, in the barley mow, the mice rustled, in that barley mow where I was happy, and whose every straw was daintily edged with silver. 'Tell me,' inquired the doctor, as

Skin for Skin he peered out of the dormer window, where we were sleeping, for a last look at the night, 'why is a young girl greater than the greatest philosopher?' I heard a cart-horse move in the barton over the way. I heard the distant barking of a farm-dog, and was silent. He had propounded a riddle that I could not answer.

The next day we returned to Montacute by way of Yeovil. We sat for an hour or two in the tap-room of The Choughs. The jackdaw face of Benjamin Disraeli looked down upon us from the wall opposite, as we drank by the stained wooden table, with the sound of the traffic of the market-town rattling past us outside. The sun slanted through the window upon the delf and the bottles behind the counter; and a little servant girl, who had been industriously sweeping out the inner parlour, passed by us, carrying in her hand a paper which contained the world's news for September 13, 1911. 'What a sweet-natured girl; fit to carry raspberries in her apron for Admiral Nelson!' observed Bernie, after she had shut the door.

We walked back by the sandy lanes. We came upon a blackbird lying dead in the dust. Its beak was as gold as a buttercup, and the feathers on its stiff body were as glossy-black as my father's cassock. We laid the bird in a sepulchre scooped out in the sandy wall of the lane. The Jews hid the body of Jesus in much the same

way, long ago in Palestine. Alack ! Between the *September*
body of a God and the body of a blackbird there
is a wide difference, and what chance had these
brittle bones of coming to life again, of extricating
any more lubberly lobworms from their dew-
moist tunnels ?

I was sad when Bernie left to stay with my
brother Willie in his dairy-farm at Witcombe. I
heard from him the next day. 'Here sits Willie,
my noble host, and cheek by jowl we write letters
in the library of the farm on whose shelves many
excellent books of the plough repose, and mark
you, Bridlegoose, Lewes's History of Philosophy.
Fancy the Joker who paid so much attention to
Georgie Eliot being allowed to bear company
with the sacred bull, the golden pigs, and the
white cock of the Capitol, whom, however, not
to put too fine a point on it, sacred or profane,
Willie had slain for our dinner.'

One morning, while we were all seated round
the Montacute breakfast-table, a robin hopped on
to the stone sill of the French window and began
eating the crumbs that my mother had put there,
a merciful enough proceeding with the brown
lawns as hard as though they were frozen. 'The
robin,' announced my father, with solemn empha-
sis, 'is the only warbler that stays with us all the
year round.' I had heard him impart this piece of
information a hundred times. 'I hate robins,
with their chirping domesticity,' remarked John

in an undertone to me. As a matter of fact, the old man's interest in birds was always pretty to see. He cherished his schoolboy collection of eggs till he was in his eightieth year, preserving these little, brittle, multi-coloured shells till the day came when he had grown so simple that he could not for the life of him recall the name of a single one of them. At the latter end of his life I remember coming suddenly into his study one day, to find him sitting over them, touching them softly with his long fingers, troubled, perhaps, by some uncertain memory of the spring mornings when he had first taken them from their nests in Stalbridge Vale, where each one of them had been brought into the world by birds who, although in their day light of wing and full of song, were now lost beyond all record in an oblivion profound and absolute. He used to lead us out on bird-nesting walks when we were children, and give us instructions as to the taking of only one egg from a nest, lest the bird 'desert.' All the eggs we found he would blow for us, holding each fragile morsel of porcelain between his fingers, telling us, meanwhile, whether it was 'fresh' or 'hard-set.' Once, during those happy Easter holidays, when I used to go bird-nesting all day long with A.R.P., scrambling through every hedge we saw, till our hands smelt of the young elder-twigs we had snapped, we found a hawfinch's nest. Now, this bird is extremely rare in

the West of England, and we had never come *September*
upon its nest or seen its egg before. Wild with excitement, we rushed home. With such a trophy in our possession, we were no longer fearful of disturbing the old man in his study. His delight almost equalled ours. He compared it with the chaffinch's egg, with the greenfinch's egg, and, in the very middle of his morning's work, got out his 'Bewick.'

My father's 'study' had an interest of its own. A smell hung about it, such as one might imagine belonged to a bison, who, with clean hoofs and healthy hide, had just been driven in from some wide prairie. On the chimney-piece were set two silver cups, which he had won at Cambridge, the larger for boating, the smaller for a walking-wager. On the wall, to the left, hung his brother's sword, the sword of that same Uncle Littleton who had died in India of the cholera. Below the sword hung an extraordinary object, round and brown and heavy – an elephant's foot! – so we were told. In Africa, after I had been pursued by one of these animals, I remember recalling grimly enough that formidable piece of matter, which, because of its ill-defined shape, used so to puzzle me as a child.

'The study' represented my father's fort, his embattled sanctuary, from which, sustained by consultations with my mother, he was able to sally forth into the world with his personal

dignity unchallenged, his personal pride unabated. How nervously would we children knock at the study door, either to consult him upon some matter of moment, or merely to ask for the use of the long stick of red sealing-wax which was always kept near his quill-pen. He liked to seal our packages for us. Very solemnly he would light one of the candles on his table and hold the scarlet stick in its flame, and from thence convey it, still burning, to the brown-paper parcel, upon which, in due time, when the wax had somewhat cooled, he would indent the Powys arms, from the gold seal on his watch-chain. And, this done, he would look up and smile with an expression of extraordinary benignity, like that on the face of a small boy who has carried through successfully some difficult undertaking. For his noble, leonine countenance could compose itself into very beneficent outlines, just as on occasions it could gather its contours into a composition sufficiently formidable to dominate the boldest of his headstrong children. And truly, how redoubtable the old man was capable of looking, with his low forehead, his long upper lip, and long tufted eyebrows ! Even in the last years of his life, with his mind devoid of articulate thought, I have seen him stand at the window of his house at Weymouth and look out over the wide wintry spaces of the English Channel for hours together, with his grey eyes under his shaggy brows proud

and undimmed as those of a king eagle! 'Looking September
out at what?' I used to wonder, as, glancing up
from my book, I would be held spellbound by
the terrific physiognomy belonging to an octo-
genarian who was reputed to be childish. The
winds would howl and grey spray would rise
from the waves, the sea-gulls would sweep over
the deserted beaches, but the aged man, who still
held himself erect in the cruel strait-jacket that
the years had laid upon him, would look out be-
yond the wildly hovering sea-birds, beyond the
tossing waves, beyond where the furthest horizon
faded behind the dim promontory of St. Alban's
Head.

On the afternoon of the same day that my
father had commented upon the habits of the
robin, I walked with him to Witcombe. He
wished to speak with my brother Willie on some
matter of business. By the Tintinhull turn, I
think it was, or between that and the forge, he
spoke of parish matters, and said that *he went on
very quietly*. He said this with more pride than
possibly can be conceived. All nature seemed to
echo the words, as though celebrating the Glory
of God. 'He goes on very quietly,' said the ditch.
'He goes on very quietly,' cried the dung-hill.
'He goes on very quietly,' repeated a passing rook,
flying in the direction of Kiss-Me-Down covert.

Witcombe was as pleasing to me as ever. It
was merry to be walking again down the narrow,

raised, stone causeway, brushed with long grasses from the hedge. In the small courtyard at the back of the house, the milk-pails were gleaming like the shields of heroes, while, inside, the rooms were as cool as those of a moss-hut. The house was very old and very mellow, with sagging boards and dark beams, and a little peep-hole in the middle of the parlour door, through which I could see valerian growing on the front wall. I left my father talking to our nurse Emily, who, since he had taken the farm, had been Willie's housekeeper, and went off down the drove to the field near the river, where they were milking. Bernie was there. He had just picked up an emperor-moth caterpillar and was putting it into a cardboard box he had with him, and would keep it, he said, till it had spun 'its lovely flask-shaped cocoon in which to serenely await its resurrection.' We approached Willie, who was sitting on a three-legged stool, his head against Ruby's flank. We approached him circuitously, giving his Hereford bull, Dick, the widest possible berth. The churlish animal never took its eyes off us. When we were within safe running distance of Willie, Bernie stopped short, and, protruding his chin, contorted his round gleaming features into a form which to him seemed to resemble that steady bovine stare. He remained motionless thus for several moments, with one foot planted in a cow-pat, and the other

thrust slightly forward, in imitation of the bull. *September*

Once at Willie's side, we were as jolly as two hedgehogs who had come to suck at the udder of that wide-horned cow. And, indeed, old Will gave us some of its milk to drink, squirting it with much laughter straight out of a warm teat into our mouths.

At the end of the month, Bernie returned to London. He wrote to me: 'How are you, my dear young Prince? What crystal thoughts are suspended in your brain, how moves the enchanting beauty of Montacute? Ralph told me you had a cold. I hope, therefore, by vigorous adherence to your wisely arranged manner of living, that you have expelled the little devil with his little red phyz and testy choler. Have you matured your plans for going to stay with Theodore? I hear he has killed his former philosophy and served it up on toast in a pretty, decorated dish of ascetic epicureanism. What delicious times we had! I hope you will like some olives I am sending you. Our Lord Montaigne must have rolled many under his tongue. I hear Hodder was happy with you. His head is like a cocoanut. Where is the gimlet that shall pierce its eye and let the milk flow out and the man spring forth? How sweet that milk was we drank in the fields!

EAST CHALDON

Now that the summer was over, it seemed wise to accept my brother Theodore's invitation to stay with him through the autumn. He lived then, as he still does, in the small village of East Chaldon, some two miles inland from those noble chalk headlands which rise one behind the other all along the sea-coast, from Weymouth to Lulworth Cove.

Never for a single moment, since he reached the age of discretion, has my brother Theodore given so much as a sunflower-seed for the busy practical life of our Western World, that shallow, unreflective life, which appears to be so exactly adapted to the taste of most Anglo-Saxons. He is like a sportsman who has left his fellow pheasant-shooters to go down into the marshlands after snipe. He is hunting a wild bird indeed, *a bird that flies zigzag*. He is hunting God.

At first, after disentangling himself from the practical occupation in which he was involved, he went to live at Studland, near Swanage. Presently, however, when even that picturesque place became overrun with summer tourists, he took his stick from his chimney-corner and set out to find some unpretentious village, where he would be altogether free from molestation. He walked

Skin for Skin on and on, over the downs. He went into Corfe, into Kimeridge, into Arishmell Bay, until eventually he arrived at Winfrith, and from there debouched to East Chaldon, which very possibly is the most hidden village in Dorset. And here, for twenty years, he has lived, occupied with his own queer, mystical illuminations, with his books, his writing, and his wife and two boys. His house is surrounded by bare downs, over the huge, supine shoulders of which sea-gulls and black rooks alternately cast their shadows. There are foxes and rabbits on these exposed uplands, and now and again in one's walks one comes upon groups of stunted gorse bushes, which towards evening resemble flocks of gorgons, resting for a moment in a flight across the world, their talons clutching fast to the short turf which covers the flinty soil of those wind-swept hills. During the twenty years my brother has walked over those downs, never once, not for a day, has he forgotten his quest. With grey, haunted eyes he has scanned the denuded, immemorial outlines of the hills. With ears pricked up like a cat's in a kitchen, he has listened to the village priest and the village pauper. Like a melancholy-eyed beagle moving in and out of the bracken, he has smelt God and will not be called off. For more than a quarter of a century he has been the manœuvring, incorrigible eavesdropper, who is always on the alert to hear, through cranny or

keyhole, what God says *when He talks to Himself.* East
Chaldon

I left Montacute on October 25th, and found Theodore waiting for me on the platform of my dear natal town of Dorchester. He had allowed his beard to grow, and he looked like some moujik strayed into Wessex, as different from the burghers of the old Roman town as a racoon in a settlement of woodchuck.

That afternoon we walked together to Ringstead Bay, a low valley which lies directly to the right of where the Great White Nore projects its proud promontories into the Channel, those same proud, immaculate promontories that I was to observe, years afterwards, gradually taking form out of the mists of the horizon, as I sailed up the English Channel, standing alone at the prow of a great liner, my eyes blind with tears, home at last after my exile in Africa. I was in high spirits to be near the sea again, and felt, as I inhaled the salt air of those lone beaches, that my cough, which had again been causing me anxiety, could not fail now to get better. With the ancestral quiver passing through me, I ran down over the sounding shingle to dip my hands in the sea!

Coming back across the downs, we stood for a moment to watch the sun sink. Behind Abbotsbury, behind the Chesil beach, the Atlantic rose like a long, low, slate-coloured wall. It was as though we two were looking at the last rampart of the world.

To wake each morning in my small room, with the clearer, lighter air of Dorset all about me, was wonderful. It was an air that had to do with high, drifting, fine-weather clouds, so different from the air of Somerset, which always seemed during the autumn months to carry with it the breath of Witcombe Bottoms or of the withy-bed near Bride's Mead, or exhalations from those toadstools of faëry colours, at that time of the year to be seen in every copse and spinney. From my bed, as I lay that first morning, I could make out the forms of two men hurdling sheep on the hills opposite, and the sound of the animals they were tending came to my ears mingled with the sounds that Theodore was making downstairs, as he broke dry sticks over his knee before the fire.

My sister Philippa also stayed with Theodore during this autumn, and many were the happy walks I took with that mysterious and singular girl, who herself would sometimes appear to be the embodiment of the wind she so much loved. On many a rough November afternoon we descended the narrow, winding path which trailed past her beloved elder bush down to the very foot of the White Nore. Often twilight would have fallen before we reached the water.

Never before had I spent an autumn by the sea, and I was excited by these long, deserted, desolate winter beaches. How the waves beat against the chalk rocks, and advanced, and receded,

and advanced again, over those cold banks of shining pebbles ! As always when in close contact with Nature, Philippa became transfigured. 'I am the hills,' she cried. 'The sea is my lover. . . . Yes, I am at ease and understood on these downlands. Once upon them, and all is forgotten.' As we came up her favourite gully, I was almost alarmed, as I looked at her small head, crooning and muttering to the wind. What passionate and intractable spirit had not God imprisoned in my sister's body !

Sometimes, of an early Sunday morning, I would enter the old grey church to take the sacrament. The crisp air outside, each straw on the road having hoar-frost upon it, made a brave contrast to the stuffy, half-darkened interior of the building, where, before a primitive altar, a bereft priest would raise a chalice aloft in a devout ecstasy. And as I knelt with bowed head to partake of the beautiful, antique ritual, I would try to conceive what inner secret the wild rumour held, so that it could survive generation after generation, wherever two or three might be gathered together. And with the curious peace of the place all about me, with the cold, bare trees in the churchyard hedge visible through the leaded window-panes, with the candle-lighted chancel, and with the Vicarage man-servant and maid-servant in the pew at my side, I would feel half inclined to believe also. Why not ? Why should

Skin for Skin not I, also, become as a little child and go to Heaven along with the Master of Corpus?

Then a different mood would come upon me. I would hear a strutting rooster in Farmer Tod's farmyard call reveille to his sely pullets, and immediately I would begin wondering what in the devil's name could have started the 'crazy story, going so crazy, crazy.' And like a green-crested poll-parrot, whose foolish head can think only of peeled almonds, I would nod and nod again at that homely altar, with its tall, spluttering, yellow candles.

In the afternoon I would perhaps walk over the downs with Theodore to the stone circle above Poxwell – or Puck's Well, as it was originally called – that stone circle put into place by other priests, centuries before any such extraordinary notion had come into God's head as to send down to earth His only-begotten son to be sacrificed by Himself, to Himself. One day Theodore commented upon the grass of his chosen habitation. 'I like this long, white, downland grass,' he said. 'Nothing ever eats it, and it's like the curious grey hairs of some old woman. It never gets wet. In summer I often roll in it.' That afternoon we came back by the sea, and Theodore selected from the beach a round, white pebble. 'To use,' he said, 'when I darn my stockings.'

SEASIDE AIR

I USED to like to wake, each morning, to see the wintry sunshine upon the short turf of the frosted downs. I would hear Theodore moving about below. 'Go out, you cats,' he would say; and a few minutes later the crackling of a fire in the parlour would become audible. I would then hurriedly dress, lest I should be too late to go with him to the village to fetch the milk. How happy we would be during those short excursions before breakfast! How we would tiptoe past the gate of the sombre Victorian vicarage, past the churchyard, and down over the crisp, stiff grass of the village green!

One morning, on our way back, we saw the sun like an All Hallow E'en pumpkin framed under the belly of one of Farmer Tod's cart-horses, the illuminated hairs of the animal's rough winter coat appearing like a sacred nimbus. And what divine chat we would have as we sat with hooked knees and lighted cigarettes over our last cup of tea!

It was on just such a morning that we set out across Egdon Heath to visit a tavern called The Seven Sisters, on the other side of Giddy Green. The sun caressed the heath, and the moorland streams flowed merrily along in their black peat

beds, each piece of gravel below their crinkled waters shining like a tiny nugget of gold. Theodore looked about him, an expression of miching mallecho flickering across his goblin features. I could not tell what was amusing him; but soon he said, 'You don't find the aspect of the moor, on such a day as this, described by Thomas Hardy.' However, the day was not destined to remain fine; for presently the wind backed to the south, and the sky became overcast. We rested on the side of a tumulus, which lay like an enormous, inverted urn in the centre of the brown waste. To the right, at the top of a sandy pit, stood a single fir tree, stunted, storm-riven. We noted how the ground below the heather was covered with an exquisite web of white lichen. Presently from the direction of the fir tree, came a rabbit, with a stoat after it. It was overtaken in the gravel-pit below. We heard its cries, as, rolling over and over, it felt the teeth of its vicious enemy sink into its jugular vein. Theodore ran forward and began throwing stones into the brambles, wherever he judged the struggling rabbit was. I stood by his side, feeling, I am ashamed to say, a kind of exultation in the thought of what was taking place. It gave me, I confess it, a sharp, attenuated refreshment to think of the tussle, down there below, between the mild-eyed, harmless, soft-furred creature and its lithe enemy, muscular and merciless.

On more than one occasion in my life I have been startled by discovering the presence in me of such lively emotions. One day, from the door of my hut in Africa, I shot at a white-breasted hawk. The bird fell from the bough of the dead olive tree upon which it had settled. My kitchen *mtoto*, a Kikuyu boy, of about fourteen years, having observed what had happened, came round from the outhouse to ask me if he could have it. Knowing how the natives delight in decorating their heads with white feathers, I told him to go and pick it up. Ten minutes later, happening to come out of my house for something, I found the boy and a little naked girl lolling on either side of the unfortunate bird, which they had spread-eagled on the ground with pegs. It was still alive, and these two children of Africa were occupied in slowly and deliberately torturing it to death. Now you would have thought that an English gentleman, brought up at an English public school and at an English university, a man who had been so sensitive as a child that he could not bear to see a horse struggling up Hollow Lane with a load of Ham Hill stones, or even a mouse drowning desperately in a bucket of water, would have felt outraged to the centre of his being by what those two children were doing. Not at all. In a flash it was revealed to me then how powerful a current in life is this particular blood-hot emotion. For no sooner had I realised what it was that

Skin for Skin was causing those delicate ebon lips to curl in so lovely, in so excited a manner, than I felt myself caught up in a gust of passion that went quivering through my frame like wind through a quaking asp, a gust of passion that remained shameless and conspiring, and which gave its complete sanction to what was taking place. Indeed, it was only by the greatest effort of will that I stepped forward to put the proud white-breasted hawk out of its misery ; and I daresay, as a matter of fact, I would not have interfered at all, had I not known that my brother Willie might appear at any moment.

Theodore and I walked now in the direction of Bindon Abbey, the same ruined Abbey into the hallowed precincts of which Angel Clare carried Tess on the night after their wedding. Here, truly, was melancholy. Before ever we had reached the ruins, it had begun to rain. They were surrounded by a moat of clear water, the bottom of which was parqu岸ed with spotted sycamore leaves. Rain drifted through the stripped trees above our heads, and in large drops pattered down upon our drenched and sopping greatcoats. I crossed over to the place where the high altar had once stood, and thought of the masses that had been celebrated there at Christmas, at the Feast of St. John, at the Feast of St. Stephen ! The nostrils of how many dead monks, buried under my feet, had inhaled the

same autumnal smells that even now rose from the garth. Coming back behind Winfrith, we passed through a field of swedes. 'Nothing in Nature,' said Theodore, 'suggests freshness and purity as much as do swedes against the brown mould, their smooth shining leaves blown by the wind, and each root so snug in the ground.'

It was during that November that I received a letter from Wilbraham, telling me that he was ill and had taken refuge in a sanatorium at Bournemouth. I went to visit him. I reached the old seaport of Poole before ten o'clock in the morning. With delight I walked along the quay-side. I came to a grass-grown square, over against the water, shut in on two sides by sober red-brick lodging-houses, and here I curled up under some fishing-nets to eat an apple I had bought for a penny, and to read John's letter. 'I whirl about from Ohio to Michigan, and from Michigan to Missouri, and as I travel to and fro I sometimes experience fear, fear of trains, of crowds, of hotels, of all the outward,' of all that 'sticking out' aspect of things which looks so sarcastic upon us poor sensitive decadents. A mad, exposed, morbid person in America, that would be a bitter subject for a book. I act my rôle well enough; but oh, how tired I am of lecturing! When you have got to the top of anything, you always find nothing. I must, my darling, tell you how I have loved your letters all this while, so

Seaside Air

Skin for Skin regularly sent. I have been transported into precisely that leisurely world you speak of, of trailing bootlaces, and half-lit cigarettes, and hesitant departures over dewy fields, and low-breathed dramatic conspiracies, while below the voice we know ascendeth unto the throne. I have been reading a new life of Voltaire. There was a man indeed! Twice an intimate friend of his carried off his girl and had her; but Voltaire did not allow such incidents to disturb the harmony of the situation. Like Lulu, he would say, 'What has happened? Nothing makes any difference. You are you, and I am I, and our darling Pimpette is as she was! Why then a lot of fuss?' So all three played and sauntered through the boulevards. And Voltaire records it afterwards in this lovely manner: 'Que nous nous aimions tous trois. Que nous étions heureux!'

I took a tram-car to Bournemouth and with no great difficulty found the sanatorium. I was shown into Wilbraham's room and sat by an open window looking out on a lawn, where two or three revolving shelters stood. I think consumptive hospitals are even more depressing in the damp of England than in the cold of Switzerland. The look of bedclothes, the look of white sheets against the chilled, green grass of an English tennis-lawn in winter, could anything possibly be more devastating? Wilbraham gave me a volume of Yeats's poems. His temperature was

high, and he had the fluttered, preoccupied look *Seaside Air*
of a man who knows that he is dying. Towards
evening I escaped from the devilish place, and,
hurrying through the smug, modern streets of
Bournemouth, came down to the sea. I walked
along the deserted sands towards Boscombe pier.
To be alive, only to be alive, may I never forget
the privilege of that ! The setting sun had left a
yellow glow in the sky, which was reflected upon
the water. Small waves kept lap-lapping over
the crisp flats, across which I walked, brisk and
jocund, testing with sensitive weasand the par-
ticular quality of the frosty seaside air.

A SMUGGLER'S PATH

I SPENT many hours during that autumn scrambling about the chalk cliffs to the left of the White Nore. From an old fisherman I learnt the names of each headland, West Bottom, Middle Bottom, Bat's Head, Scratchy, Swyre Head, Big Durdle, Mupe Rocks, Cock Pit, Arishmell. Below Middle Bottom there stretches a beach, about a mile in length, shaped like a crescent moon, and impossible to be reached except by boat. I would often stand with Theodore and peer down upon that curved bank of shelving shingle, cleansed and cleansed again by wind and waves and rain. From where we used to stand we could hardly hear the waves breaking, so far below us were they, and so wildly did the sea-gulls scream, as they swept backwards and forwards, with open beaks, over that blue abyss.

One morning, as I walked along Middle Bottom, I noticed a rabbit disappear over the cliff's edge. On coming to the place, I made out a kind of ledge, down which a man might possibly clamber to a rocky projection, some forty feet below. Immediately I was seized with a great desire to reach this point. The fisherman had told me that smugglers in the old days had frequented this bay, and it seemed to me that I had probably

Skin for Skin found the top of the path used by them when scaling the cliff. Very slowly, scarcely venturing to look at the wrinkled sea below me, I clambered down, foot by foot. Once on the other side of the rock, I came upon a rusty iron bar, deeply embedded in the face of the bluff. I reached it, and held to it with both hands, as the only stable thing on the side of that tilted precipice. My knees trembled. The idea of climbing back terrified me, the idea of climbing down terrified me. And yet, how exciting, if only I could manage to reach that purged and chastened beach, at which I had so often gazed ! Again I descended. There was a kind of track. Once I dislodged a small stone and shivered to see how it fell with scarcely a break to the pebbles so far below.

I was a full hour in the solitary cove. I trudged from one end to the other of its virginal beach, shaped like a horned moon. I came upon a dead sea-gull and cut off its wing to carry back as a gift to my sweet sea-gull sister. Under Bat's Head I found a cave, and crawled into its further recesses where I lay for a time listening to the boom-boom of the waves, as they rolled in upon the hollow tunnels, honeycombing that solitary headland. The cave was full of seaweed, and I picked up a long brown riband and bound it round my forehead. Its surface was smooth and slippery, and no mermaid could have smelt more intimately of the sea.

Walking back to the place where I would have to begin the ascent, I looked up. All was blue and white – white cliffs and blue sky, white surf and blue sea, white birds and blue, curling waves! I felt giddy. I could see the smuggler's stake sticking out of the precipice like a nail in a white-washed wall. When I had scaled some fifty feet, I looked round. There below me were the tracks I had made in the wet, red shingle. Above, the cliff flanked itself against the sky like a snow-covered alp. I began climbing again, and in a few minutes was once more clinging to the corroded iron stake. Only faintly now there came to my ears the monotonous ebb and flow of the sea, insistent and resonant as the respiration of some sleeping Cerne Giant.

On the way back over the downs, it began to rain, and I spent the afternoon lying on the sofa by the window. Before I lit my lamp, my eye fell with a heightened sense of consciousness upon the window-panes, splashed and bespattered with raindrops. Perhaps I could have looked wittingly upon no material objects better able to make me aware of my existence than those flat rain-washed sheets of glass, which appeared to me then so colourless and melancholy, so suggestive, in the fading light, of every wet afternoon that I had ever known. Theodore came in, and I realised at once that he was sunk in one of his worst moods of depression. His features had the same

Skin for Skin dreary look that was presented by the patient window-panes with the grey rain trickling down them. We talked together. 'In this life, all we can do,' he said, 'is each day so to tire our limbs that rest is acceptable – and finally death.' I spoke of the blessedness of life, but he would have none of it. 'For a pint of honey a gallon of gall, for a dram of pleasure a pound of pain, for an inch of mirth an ell of moan. For as ivy doth encompass the oak, so do our miseries encompass our lives. Your philosophy is false,' he cried, with more emotion than I had ever known him to display, 'false, false, and again false. We must learn to welcome Death. Death is the great Father of all things ; for without him there is no Life.'

Certainly Theodore is capable of becoming more hopelessly unhappy than any of us ; and on such occasions his finely moulded face, with *its* long upper lip, takes upon it an expression of such utter dejection, that one can only catch one's breath, as if one had passed the Iscariot, rope in hand, walking towards his elder tree, that same elder tree whose aromatic, pith-filled twigs were still quick when Sir John Mandeville visited Palestine seven hundred years ago. But then, again, when he has not seen too much of you, when he thinks he has enough money in his tea-chest to store his cellar with coal, when he thinks the common people regard him with a friendly eye, when he thinks his mattresses do

not smell of old bones, as John once had the temerity to suggest, and when he knows that you are not making love to any *very young* girls, then he will have his days, his hours, his moments. On such occasions the most unexpected observations will come from his mouth, one after the other, like sparks from a Twelfth Night bonfire ; his sardonic, dry quips, his double-tongued chirpings, jumping this way and that like crickets in a hot hay-field.

*A Smuggler's
Path*

A.R.P. turned up one afternoon. He had come down to see some building in the neighbourhood, and had brought with him another architect. We all went a walk together. The conversation turned on 'The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings,' of which my brother A.R.P. has been for many years the secretary. 'This devotion,' said Theodore, 'for old things, old houses, old furniture, is often exaggerated out of all due proportion. Why, a human child is older than all these.' There has always been a certain inclination on Theodore's part to make sport of this particular brother, who, not even excepting Littleton, has done more 'honest work' in his life than all the rest of us put together. Perhaps Theodore is provoked by his direct, downright, positive manner, he himself being ever indirect in his advances and retreats, ever addicted to perfidious prevarications and ironic acquiescences. It was dark before we reached the quarry, but, as

we came over the Five Marys, at the point of the road where the old thorn bush is which has been bent like a well-used besom by a thousand gales from the south-west, the moon suddenly swung into view, like an enormous lantern, on the left of Flower's Barrow.

We had seen two things of interest in our walk, a few sprays of winter jasmine nodding under the shelter of a West Chaldon cottage, and some farm-boys, with holly in their caps, showing their feeling that Christmas was not far off. When Theodore was taking off his gaiters by the fire, and I was unlacing my boots, there was the sound of laughter and quick movement across the floor upstairs. 'What are they making all that noise about up there?' asked Theodore, with simulated peevishness. 'You never know what they will be up to next, these architects, when they get together.' A few days after A.R.P.'s departure, this letter arrived for Theodore: 'How are your funds? Could you put me up for the New Year, for booze-night; could you or Lulu provide drink?' It was answered after the following manner: 'If you come on booze-night, to-day three weeks, you will have to pay ten shillings. We all pay our share. If you come any other night, no drink at all.

'See and Hear
Wine is dear.'

When Theodore's birthday came, five days

before Christmas, I gave him a fine blizzard- *A Smuggler's*
lantern, which I had bought in Dorchester, for *Path*
him to use when he went out to his shed at night
to chop up sticks.

A CHRISTMAS EVE

It looked as if we were going to have a green Christmas. For days on end it continued to rain so that presently we could hardly conceive the smoke from the chimneys blowing from any other direction than the south-west. Theodore and I planned to do our shopping on Christmas Eve. On December twenty-fourth, therefore, we had an early breakfast and set off over the moor to catch the train into Dorchester. It was not raining when we started, though the sky was heavy with clouds. As we were shutting the white gate out of the garden, the postman arrived and handed me a letter from Switzerland. I opened it, to find that Wilbraham, who in desperation had fled back to Davos Platz, was dead.

As we passed the Vicarage gate, I noticed how out at the elbow, out at the knee, out at the heel, Theodore was. In those days I had not yet learnt how little it matters whether a man has a good cloak over him or not. From my childhood I had always entertained certain middle-class prejudices, and I was still too close to Sherborne and Cambridge not to set considerable store by a new pair of breeches. He took my protest in good part ; but even as I was speaking, I felt ashamed ; aware as I was, that however ragged his jacket

Skin for Skin might be, he himself remained inflexibly loyal to a certain poetic conception of the world which in its intolerance of the vulgar and the commonplace set him once and for all outside ordinary standards.

When the train drew up at Moreton, we got into a carriage with some country people, who were also going into town to do their shopping. Theodore remarked how one of the children, a little girl of fourteen years, was still wearing her summer hat, a shady straw hat, which looked pathetic enough when we got out at the South Western Station, to find that it had again begun to rain. Presently we were walking along one of those stately avenues, the trees of which were planted by French prisoners at the time of the Napoleonic wars. Over the high wall which surrounds its gardens I saw the solidly built Victorian chimneys of the house in which I was born. How often have I not tried to reconstruct for myself that occasion when opportunity was given for me to be created. By what auspicious hazard was a way prepared, during the autumn of the year of our Lord 1883, for me to appear on this round world, the eighth child of Charles Francis and Mary Cowper, a unique composite of the dust of a million progenitors, allowed, in its turn, an ephemeral existence, in which to see, to smell, to hear, to taste, and to touch? Surely the brave nature of the reversion granted

to me on that far-off night cannot be gainsaid. *A Christmas Eve*
Let these devilish, badger-headed scientists reduce all matter to a series of revolving electrons, it still remains a sublime miracle of miracles that man, with brittle egg-shell skull, should have been raised, should have raised himself out of the dust! To open delicately contrived eyelids on this earth, on this fifth-smallest of the planets, which like a flock of frightened birds keep sailing about the sun, is surely a chance beyond all chances. It would be better to be a midget than a dead stone, it would be better to be a mud-eating lobworm under the ground than a dead stone, better to be a white-bellied beetle in Pit Pond than a dead stone, and better, how much better, to be a cogitating mammal, firmly set upon his heels, capable of prevision, capable of retrospection, capable of wittolry.

And the fact that I was eventually born in the month of August, 'born in a corn-field,' as John declares, has always been a satisfaction to me. Down in the West of England those four weeks have a character of their own. They know nothing of the mystical intimations which belong to the spring, and yet, at the same time, they are void of the sombre tints of cold annihilation that one comes to associate with the fall of the year. This month of Cæsar Augustus is a hot, good-natured, casual month. During its thirty-one days the foison of many a broad acre grows ready

Skin for Skin for the harvest ; indeed, the countryside, far and near, lies basking under its hedges, like some swart, amorous dairy-wench, in sultry contentment, her vagrant longings at last completely satisfied. In the month of August the power of the Priest is at its nadir. Let him raise pale, vested hands before never so many ornate altars, let him thunder in the garb of an evil crow from never so many Puritan pulpits, it will profit him little. Behold ! the grain grows golden in its husk, the green apples swell on their whorled twigs, and the shell of each hazelnut is neatly fitted with its ivory kernel. What have we to fear?

It was growing dark before we were ready to leave the gay, lighted streets, which, in spite of the heavy downpour, were so filled with festive faces. Theodore had bought a sledge-hammer for breaking up his coal, and with this primitive implement over his shoulder we began our walk, the rain blowing in gusts against our muffled figures, the naked hedgerows on each side of the old Wareham highway only dimly visible. A glimmer of light shone through the trees surrounding Max Gate. We thought of the old man in there, sitting by his apple-wood fire, brooding on God knows how many past Christmas nights ; the old man whose genius we so loved and honoured. On we went, the sentinel elms by the field-gates appearing and disappearing. Now and

then, a tranter's van would overtake us, its dim, swaying lantern throwing upon our drenched forms a momentary illumination. As we came up over Broadmayne hill we remembered that we knew the clergyman of the place, an eccentric, bigoted, old-fashioned Calvinist, who lived with his two daughters, whose wits, together with those of their father, had been well-nigh turned by so much reading of the Bible. We determined to call at his house. It stood a little way back from the village street, a dark, gloomy vicarage, with the plaster falling from its walls. We turned towards it. On that Christmas Eve it presented to us a perfectly negative front. No light shone from any of its windows, from any of those tall black, upstairs windows, whose heavy sashes were surely never opened to let fresh air into the bare, loveless bed-chambers they sheltered ! We pulled at the bell. A hollow clack-clack-clack sounded, like the falling of a tin plate on a scullery floor. We waited. We could hear singing in the village ; but except for this, and the sound made by a broken gutter emptying its water into the blackness of some shrubs to our left, there was nothing to disturb the forlorn quietude of the place.

We turned to go, and then, from somewhere, from some room far removed from the lidless windows at which we gazed, we heard the unmistakable sound of a door opening. A moment

later and one of the girls was at the threshold, holding in her hand a guttering candle, the light of which made visible each raindrop falling at that particular moment between our eyes and her small, soberly dressed figure. We were conducted into the kitchen at the back of the house. The old man was out, they told us. He had gone to the bedside of a dying woman. The two girls made us welcome. They put a heavy iron kettle on to a fire, made in a grate which still held the grey ashes of many previous fires. I don't think I ever enjoyed a supper more than this one with these two extraordinary girls, whose minds had been given so odd a twist by the theological whimsies of their father, and whose demure bodies were so obviously never destined to be held in the free, unscrupulous arms of a lover. Our sudden appearance, out of the dark night, evidently excited them, and they set before us a fine feast, with toast, and bread-and-butter, and goose-eggs, and 'braun of tuskèd swyne.' With shining eyes, and quaint mouths awry with merriment, they listened to the stories of our day's adventures, their work-boxes and the garments they were making for the poor of the parish put away for once, on the side of the dresser. With a look of infinite deference on his astounding pigwiggen features, Theodore listened to everything either of them said; indeed, with his sledge-hammer leaning against his chair, he addressed

them as if they had been princesses in disguise. *A Christmas*

Before we left, the elder of the two put a large *Eve*

black-covered Bible before him, requesting that a chapter should be read. And so it came to pass that I found myself on this anniversary of Our Lord's birth listening to my brother's well-modulated voice intoning the sacred Scriptures. He selected to read from the sixth chapter of the Book of the Prophet Amos ; and it seems to me that I can still hear the voice of this atheist, who is by his nature so profoundly religious, 'reading a chapter' over that kitchen table. We all four of us knelt on the uncarpeted floor. I watched a small mouse that kept running out from behind a basket of sticks. Once my eye rested on the figure of Joan, who knelt before me in rudely cobbled boots, with clasped hands raised above her head. And I suppose, until I am dead, the august, admonitory words that came to my ears will be associated with a little, frolicsome Christmas mouse, with a bespattered window as seen under a coarse calico blind, with the ecstatic look on a praying woman's face. 'Woe to them that are at ease in Zion . . . that lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock and the calves out of the midst of the stall ; that chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David ; that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the

Skin for Skin chief ointments . . . which rejoice in a thing of nought, which say, Have we not taken to ourselves horns by our own strength ?

A NEW YEAR'S EVE

ON New Year's Eve my brother Littleton came to visit us. Nobody had concerned himself more about my illness than he. It was through his exertions that I originally went to Switzerland and he was now anxious to persuade me to return there for a few months, so as to avoid the treacherous English spring. I saw him off at Wool, and he got into a carriage with the Rev. Hugh Upton. I had not seen the Rev. Hugh since I had left school. The aura of his personality seemed to have pervaded every crevice of the dusty, upholstered, first-class carriage in which he sat. There had been always something unctuous and self-satisfied about him. I had remarked this fact even as a boy, when I had watched him one summer afternoon crossing the school-field, adorned in a Trinity Hall black-and-white cricket blazer. What a supercilious soul his smile betrayed, and how incredibly complacent the man looked now, with his legs wrapped round with an expensive travelling-rug! The schoolmasters of English public schools, what a set they are! How limited! How provincial! Well I know them with their shallow routine minds. Well I know them with their fussy preoccupation over the sexual chastity of their charges, content if they

can turn out into the world, year by year, young men devoid of imagination, devoid of any social conscience outside their own class, and completely incapable of philosophic thinking ; young men, whose sole accomplishment would seem to be in a state of Holy Matrimony, to propagate others like unto themselves. The mere thought, as I sit here in Montoma, with a score of blue-jays rattling in the Indian corn outside, in the corn which should have been harvested long ago and is now frosted and dry, the mere thought of these schoolmasters puts me out of humour.

It is wonderful how wisely emancipated Littleton has remained, seeing that he has lived at close quarters with them for so many years. Even at its height, his passion for athletics was never able to dull for him the pleasure he derived from nature and literature. Some of the happiest hours of my life have been spent at his side, walking over the turf of Corton Downs, thyme-scented and pliant underfoot, walking from Montacute to Pilsdon, to get our first glimpse of the sea, the blue, straight line of it suggesting to us, fresh from our inland orchards, so large a liberation ; walking up through Porlock, up through the Horner woods, to the wild moors around Dunkery Beacon, where the smell of burnt heather would rise from the ground, and the cry of curlews be upon the wind. As a small boy,

how thrilled I used to be by his athletic prowess, how thrilled to come on to the school-ground and see his familiar and beloved figure at the wicket, so strong, so lithe, so light of action. In the old days at Montacute, he used to play cricket for the village. I can now hear the back gate slam to on a summer evening, revealing him in the yard, with his long-shaped cricket-bag in his hand. And how, upon such occasions, I would leave my play, and run to him, and ask him 'how many he had made,' and follow him upstairs to his room, to the West Room, and stay talking with him until he was ready to come down to the dining-room, where my mother would be waiting for him with his supper on the table. And then, when he was seated at his place, at the right of my father's chair, my mother would go to him and kiss that clear forehead, free from all guile, and listen, working at her sewing, to all that he would relate, as he ate his cold mutton, his lettuce, and his stewed rhubarb, about the soft rose-pink stalks of which the milk from the tomtit jug would curdle.

At supper that night, Theodore and I decided that we would walk over the downs to the Stone Circle. We had a fancy to see the old year out within the circumference of that heathen cromlech. It was a frosty night. As soon as the white garden-gate had clicked back on to its latch, we found that the road under our feet was no longer

Skin for Skin muddy, but was already sparkling in the star-shine. Away we went, past the old barn, past the field where the sea-gulls collect, our walking-sticks hitting on the resonant ground, and one topic of conversation following on the heels of another, like baboons along an escarpment-ledge. As we came through the farmyard at West Chaldon, we paused to watch a labourer in the long, thatched stable giving fodder to his horses. The look of that warm interior, on this last day of the year, hay-smelling, harness-smelling, horse-smelling, put us in mind of the simple lives of these people, and of how the seasons pass over their heads in swift succession, from sowing-time even unto ploughing-time, and how they take it all as calmly and naturally as the old draught-mare we could even now see, with outstretched neck and thick prehensile lip, nuzzling at the hay in the rack above its head.

Once on the downs, all was clear and translucent. Fold upon fold of these ancient hills lay before us in all their midnight beauty. We would come to a gate, with the rime gleaming upon its top bar, open it, and pass on to an upland, even more remote, more secluded. We passed the grey wall, near where, in the early autumn, we had one day filled our handkerchiefs with button-mushrooms, cold mushrooms so sweet that even in their raw state it was pleasant to nibble at them. We passed the holly-hedge from which

we had gathered red berries to decorate our room for Christmas, the very places where we had broken off branches clearly visible in the star-light. *A New Year's Eve*

At last we were there. Theodore entered the ring first, the shadow of his bowed figure – he had taken his old cloak about him – appearing, as it fell across the deep-sunken stones, like the shadow of some Biblical prophet, like the shadow of the prophet Amos ! And with what curious, prophetic eyes he squinnied up at the sky during those still, frosty moments !

We were silent. There we stood, in the enchanted circle, like two fools, like two conjured haggards, looking out beyond the great square of Pegasus, beyond the Milky Way, to the furthest, uncharted tracts of a material Universe without beginning and without end.

‘TIMOR MORTIS CONTURBAT ME’

I PERSUADED Theodore to leave his retreat for once and travel with me as far as Folkestone. He wrote to some friends of his at Aldeburgh, asking whether he could stay with them for three days on his way back. He penned the note in his meticulous handwriting, every single letter being formed with exaggerated care, as though they were hieroglyphics. ‘Surely,’ he said, when at last he had finished, ‘surely they can put up with me for three days. Why, the Jews put up with Jesus for thirty years.’ How individual he looked, as he stood on the quay, waving his stick ! The well-dressed people by whom he was surrounded appeared like so many ninnies in contrast with this bearded man, in dark clothes, who hunts for God as a collector hunts for a great auk’s egg. And what a knowing, sidelong twisted glance he had given me, as the train slid past the great Necropolis at Woking !

I had arranged to go to Arosa, a small winter-resort in the Engadine as far as I knew unvisited by consumptives. One reached the place by Coire, driving from there some twenty miles by sleigh. I had selected to stay in the best hotel of the place. Its door was opened to me by an enormous, gold-braided porter, and a moment later I found myself

Skin for Skin in a lighted hall resounding with high-pitched English voices. If I were to see the same people to-day, I daresay I should think very little of them. As it was, I felt impressed. Their assurance, their correct dress, their constant use of 'sporting slang,' intimidated me. I did not realise, as I came to realise later, that these people were regarded with nothing but amused contempt by the real aristocracy, who, demanding above everything else individuality, would not give a purple mulberry for an assemblage of this kind, where everybody was trying to behave exactly like everybody else. What added to my own immediate discomfiture, however, was the discovery, when I came down to dinner the first evening, that all the men were wearing dinner-jackets instead of tail-coats. I felt indignant that Littleton, who, as a general rule is up to the mark in such matters, had not thought of telling me the correct fashion in dress for hotel dining-rooms. To have to enter, each night, the resplendent *salle-à-manger*, and walk across to my table in my tail-coat, was to me an extremely humiliating ordeal. I came to dread the evenings, came to dread the time when it was necessary for me to sally out of my bedroom, and would feel no sense of ease until I had reached my chair and had the offending appendages safely concealed under me. And even then, I had only to rise to leave the room, and I would feel as if

the eye of every waiter and every guest were riveted on the superfluous part of my dress. So great was my mortification that I was rendered incapable of regarding the situation humorously. In truth, one downward glance of the sardonically obsequious, gold-braided porter, as I reached the foot of the wide, carpeted stairs, would be sufficient to disrupt any state of philosophic composure which I might have attained in the solitude of my chamber. Even after I had made friends with the few distinguished people who were staying in the hotel, and had thereby cunningly formed a screen between myself and the rest, who now no longer dared to look at me askance, I still experienced moments of extreme self-consciousness; as when two young popinjays, finding me settled in a favourite corner of theirs, warmed by a radiator, expressed their annoyance by the use of the two words, 'hard cheese,' a phrase which, though doubtless natural enough to them, seemed to me, so hypersensitive had I become, to suggest a kind of sneering contempt for my presence, a contempt I could only attribute to the fact that I must appear to them utterly absurd, sitting there with my coat-tails tucked so carefully out of sight.

Soon after I arrived, I took my temperature, and found that it was slightly up. I assumed that this was due to the high altitude, and in consequence kept very quiet for a day or two.

Skin for Skin As it never rose over a hundred, I soon grew tired of resting, and bought myself some racket snowshoes, so that I could leave the cleared paths and walk over the mountains. On one of these excursions, I descended a steep slope, to come suddenly upon a bright fire, built by a band of woodcutters, its scarlet flames flickering against the whiteness of the snow like a tattered cardinal's robe upon a field of ermine. Flames and snow, and strong bearded men, sitting, like characters in one of Grimm's fairy-stories, under the shadows of the pine trees !

On another day I went with pretty Imogen to look for the grave of a friend of hers, dead three years before. It would have interested Theodore, I thought, to have seen me scrabbling in the snow, trying in vain to find a headstone with the name of my rival carved upon it. How cold it was, scraping at that frozen surface, but not so cold, I'll be bound, as it felt in the frozen earth below ! I had a letter from Theodore that evening. "I am delighted to hear that all goes well ; but don't fall off one of those bloody mountains. Your wisdom grows here ; it fell upon good ground. Joy *is* never-ending ; only it must be the joy that dares to drink to the bottom. Talk of cold ! Verily, my bones freeze, and all water is ice. How the wind shakes the chain on my coach-house door. 'I have never been sick or sorry,' was a word I heard, to-day, said with pride. 'Neither

wilt thou be,' I might have added, 'until thou beginnest to live.'"

*'Timor Mor-
tis Conturbat
Me'*

One day I went on a long excursion with Imogen. We had our luncheon seated behind a châlet, she sitting on a milk-stool that I found half buried in the snow, and I on a board. It was warm in the sun, and the air about the old wooden shelter was fragrant with the mountain hay upon which we had been playing, and which was piled high up in the dim, aromatic interior of that upland barn. I looked with glee at the dry, brown, dung-stained wood on which I sat, at the two empty shells of the hen's eggs, which my companion said I must bury, and at the sea-green icicles, which hung from a mountain-precipice, far up above us, like frozen snot on a giant's beard. And then I coughed, and recognised the unmistakable taste of mortality, and fear leapt in my throat like a live frog. Imogen had been very charming to me that morning. When we finally left the hut, I gave her the hare's foot which I had got from Willie as a cure against any fresh attack of the stone. 'Ah! now,' she said laughing, 'I shall be able to run swiftly to you, or swiftly away from you, just as I want'; and her free eyes mocked at me, with challenging mischief, from under her hair, which was the exact colour of faded bracken seen with the sun upon it.

When we reached the road, we followed

behind a line of sleighs, the drivers brandishing long whips by the sides of their jangling teams. We stopped at a wayside house, and two old women brought us milk in white china cups. They stood by us in amazement, and one of them put out her hand and touched Imogen's hair. Within the house was a man in a blue smock, dipping bread into a steaming bowl.

Presently we left, and once more tramped up the slippery road. It began to snow, and our footsteps made two parallel tracks. How curious, I thought, to consider one's physical progress over the face of the earth. In my mind's eye, as we climbed higher and higher, I seemed to see the movement of each individual, of each human being, like the shining, silvery paths of so many snails over an enormous rhubarb-leaf. For from the moment that our voices are first heard, from the moment that we begin to clutch, with wrinkled fingers, strong as the claws of a parrot, and yet dainty as ivory bobbins, until such time as we are laid away in hollow coffins, it must be remembered that we actually make a physical progress, to and fro, this way and that, through cities, over mountains, through forests, over deserts, in and out of my lady's chamber, past this or that field-gate, advancing, doubling back, like hunted foxes, some to be run to earth in the home covert, and others in forests and quarries, far enough removed from the place of their birth.

We approached Arosa by the lower valley. *'Timor Mor-*
For some distance our way lay near the river. *tis Conturbat*
It was melancholy to see how befouled it had *Me'*
become; everywhere, on its banks, heaps of
refuse, from which, at intervals, hideous crows
flapped away, calling, 'Cark! Cark! Cark!'

Imogen had taken off her glove to push her
hair more securely under her hat. I caught her
bare hand and held it fast. It was tremulous and
warm, like a live thrush.

‘NAY . . . VERY RED’

THE next morning, after breakfast, I had occasion to speak to my friend, the gold-braided porter. As we were talking, my eyes strayed over a large map of the Engadine, which hung on the wall behind his ponderous head. Suddenly they were arrested by the words, ‘Davos Platz,’ in close juxtaposition to that of Arosa. Immediately I examined the map more closely, and discovered, to my extreme surprise, that although by train the two places were separated by a twenty-four-hour journey, as the crow flies, only some fifteen or twenty miles of mountain lay between them. And what was more, I realised that the mountain at which I had so often looked from the hotel verandah was nothing else than the topmost ridge of ‘Queen Victoria in Bed,’ as seen from ‘the other side.’ This discovery, so unexpected, amazed and fascinated me. I became obsessed now by a mountain that rose beyond the river, the same mountain over which, in the map, were written the words Furka Pass. I could think of nothing else but that so short a distance lay between me and the well-known scenes of my long illness. It was like one of those dreams, when familiar places, far distant from each other, are suddenly, to one’s utter astonishment, found

to converge, when the school-yard of Acreman House, for instance, would be found suddenly, unaccountably, to open into the poplar-field behind Hocky's House. That morning's discovery seemed now completely to obsess my imagination. I would be forever looking up at the Furka Pass and at the mountain which rose behind it. The people with whom I had made friends interested me now not a jot. Even when I was out with sweetest Imogen, I would be preoccupied. A strange madness seemed to have fallen upon me, such as I conjecture seizes upon cats when they feel suddenly compelled to return to the place from whence they came. I kept imagining myself descending those very slopes whose beauty, as seen from my bed with the last glow of the sun upon them, had so often beguiled for me the end of a long afternoon. Eventually, I determined, come what might, I would try to cross the mountains.

The day I selected for my adventure was cloudless. I told no one of my purpose. I walked slowly, but steadily, and soon found myself above the timber line. Here I was confronted by smooth sheets of sparkling, virginal snow. The crows in the dark trees below croaked a warning, but I gave no heed to them. The actual Furka Pass, as I remember it, was about two hundred yards wide. It was a steep incline of snow that went down into I knew not what abyss. I unstrapped

my snowshoes. By stamping with my boots I 'Nay . . .
found I was able to break the frosty crust of the *Very Red*
snow, and in this way secure a firm footing.

Once over the pass, I was on the edge of a long mountain-plateau, surrounded by high peaks. All was glittering white. All was silent. No track of man or animal traversed that high expanse. No flight of bird cleft its blue rarefied air. Only one living thing did I meet – a tortoise-shell butterfly ! It came fluttering towards me, over those eternal snows, with the aimless, careless flight that seems characteristic of this particular species. All the time I kept looking up at the sky. I knew my real danger lay in the possibility of being overtaken by a snow-storm. On I went, over the level stretches of that high No Man's Land. And ever behind me I left a peculiar, webbed track, as though some fabulous grebe had come waddling over the mountains. I was excited. I felt my pulse. It was racing. As the hours passed I became more and more conscious of the hot flush of my sickness tingling under my skin. Half stifled by the palpitations of my heart, I walked on. Shadows purple and drunken lay across the snow ; while above me, so close that I staggered under it like a man who fears to lift his head, glowered the flaming orb of the azygous sun.

And then, suddenly, all my misgivings vanished, and I was rewarded. I had reached the

Skin for Skin last ridge, and, behold, I was looking down on the Frauenkirch valley! There, far below, on the slope of the mountain opposite, stood the sanatorium, like a tiny, trig doll's house against the stupendous Alpine landscape. I was exultant. I was in an ecstasy. I knew that I was actually standing on one of the very ridges that had seemed to me only the year before as remote as the farthest rose-cupped cloud. For a time I could find no way by which I could reach the timber-line below. Then, by skirting along the edge of a dangerous-looking snow-field, I at last arrived at the trees. I found a mountain shed, with a woodcutter's path leading from it. Half an hour afterwards I was in the Frauenkirch village. I hired a room in the little inn, and made my way slowly up to the sanatorium, not forgetting to stop for a moment at the white mill to touch with my fingers the place where the plaster had broken off in the shape of a dromedary.

I arrived at the sanatorium just as the patients were collecting in the dining-room. My appearance seemed miraculous, my story unbelievable. With my face tanned to an unhealthy, blazing red, I walked from one familiar group to another, the young German doctor, in his white coat, following me about, asking me, in broken English, to explain how I had cured myself. And all the while, as I was receiving their congratulations, I could feel an impediment in my

breathing, and my heart knocking against the walls of my ribs like the rattling beat of some cheap alarum-clock. Before long I left the noisy hall and stepped into the cold snow outside, illuminated, as of old, by reflections from those sad, flaunting windows. On the way back I entered a mountain forest. What was that I heard, as I crouched there, on the hard snow, dibbled with fallen twigs and fir-cones – the scuffling of the hounds of death?

When I reached the inn I went straight to bed. By throwing open the double windows, I flooded my room with frosty air. I lay down, but I could not sleep. Nervous thoughts scurried through my skull like mice in an attic. Once, twice, three times, I heard the pre-reformation bell in the little timber church strike the hour; and then, all at once, I began to suspect that what I had half been anticipating had actually happened. With a miserable sinking at the pit of my stomach I suddenly recognised the intolerable bubbling sensation in my chest, indicative of a hæmorrhage. I turned on the light, hoping against hope. I coughed; I looked; and once more I saw blood!

Slowly, very slowly, the dawn came. News of my relapse was sent to my old doctor, and a sleigh arrived, a black, closed sleigh, to carry me back to the sanatorium, the greatest fool in all that dolorous citadel. Once more I lay on my

Skin for Skin back, perfectly motionless, like a rabbit who 'freezes' in a thicket of thorns, in the hope that he will not be seen, in the hope that the danger that threatens him will pass by. Once more I was waked each morning by the clinking sound of sputum-cups being collected in the white corridor outside. Once more I was looking out beyond the shadowed contours of 'Queen Victoria in Bed' to where the pale-green light of the evening sky, pale-green as the wing of a katydid, spoke in so deceptive, in so deceitful, a manner of the immortality of the soul.

